

THE DEMS' SCHOOL-
REFORM PARALYSIS

E.J. DIONNE ON THE END
OF RIGHT-WING HISTORY

HEY, HOLLYWOOD: WHERE'S
OUR WONDER WOMAN FLICK?

THE AMERICAN PROSPECT

LIBERAL INTELLIGENCE

SEPTEMBER 2008

*How Barack Obama
is transforming the
historically wimpy
Democratic Party
into a formidable
nationwide machine*

PARTY ANIMAL

*PLUS: Where does
MoveOn.org go
once the country
has moved on?*

*Rick Perlstein calls
for a progressive
"shock doctrine"*

*On the trail
with the new
pragmatists of the
Mountain West*

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THE AMERICAN PROSPECT

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"Without parties, there can be no organized and coherent politics. When politics lacks coherence, there can be no accountable democracy."

—COMMITTEE FOR PARTY RENEWAL OF
THE AMERICAN POLITICAL SCIENCE
ASSOCIATION, 1977

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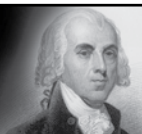
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Crash: Financial and Ideological

THE NEW PRESIDENT WILL FACE A THREE-PART ECONOMIC crisis of a magnitude not seen since the Great Depression. Remedy, in turn, will require drastic revision of the ideological assumptions that have dominated American political discourse, in both major parties, for a generation.

The president will face a financial collapse that is still deepening; an implosion in consumer demand; and international constraints on his freedom to engineer a recovery—rising food and energy inflation and a severely weakened dollar. Preventing a slide from recession into depression will entail a more activist use of government than since the Kennedy and Johnson era. This means reviving not just financial regulation but also government spending.

On Jan. 20, the Bush recession will become the Obama or McCain recession. To succeed, the next president will have to transform public understanding of what needs to be done. If he doesn't appreciate that, he should not want the job.

On the financial front, credit markets remain in a state of severe trauma. Entire categories of securities are not trading or can be traded only because the Federal Reserve keeps pumping hundreds of billions of dollars into the banking system, an unsustainable policy.

In late July, under pressure from the Federal Reserve and the Securities and Exchange Commission, the Financial Accounting Standards Board hastily withdrew a rule that requires banks to book their assets at their current market value. Had the rule been enforced, America's major banks would be insolvent, since many of their securities cannot be unloaded at any price. Before this crisis is over, America's banks will need to be recapitalized by something like a

trillion dollars—either by foreign sovereign wealth funds and other overseas investors or by U.S. taxpayers.

The crashing sound in financial markets is also the crash of an ideology. What has collapsed is the idea that money markets could accurately price exotic assets and operate efficiently without government either setting rules or providing help.

We have been spared a depression only thanks to the portions of the New Deal that conservatives did not manage to repeal. In late July, several runs on banks occurred—not because depositors were fearful but because shareholders, belatedly cognizant of the carnage on bank balance sheets, were in panicky flight from bankstocks. Our president, one of history's great government-bashers, said in reassurance, "My hope is that people take a deep breath and realize that their deposits are protected by the government." Imagine that.

But the Bush administration and many commentators still suffer from a case of cognitive dissonance. The ideology has failed, but the melody lingers on.

For a year now, the Bush administration has been pursuing emergency regulatory interventions in practice that it does not accept in theory. Since mid-2007, the ad-hoc rescue operations

conducted by Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson and Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke have included:

- An emergency takeover of Bear Stearns by JP Morgan Chase, at fire-sale prices, putting \$30 billion of taxpayer money at risk.

- Offering a general line of credit to large investment banks that have no special government guarantee or supervision.

- Putting effectively unlimited government capital at the disposal of Fannie Mae.

- Inviting banks and other creditors to come to the Fed and exchange junk securities for government-guaranteed Treasury bills.

Most of this was done under the Federal Reserve's emergency authority enacted during the Roosevelt administration. Except for the Fannie Mae bailout, none of it had congressional authorization, nor did the Bush administration announce an explicit reversal of the general policy of financial deregulation.

It's fortunate that Paulson reversed course and pursued these massive interventions. Otherwise, this already would be a depression. But in the next administration, these ad-hoc rescues need to become a coherent philosophy of financial regulation. And they

should be accompanied by explicit measures to restore tighter supervision of all financial institutions, to reduce risks to the taxpayers and to prevent another cycle of bubble-and-bail.

This will require the next president, in his role as teacher-in-chief, to educate the public about the massive failure of an entire ideology. That reversal is also

necessary to remedy the prime casualty of financial deregulation—the deepening collapse of consumer purchasing power. The cure is not just better banking regulation. Government will need to spend more public dollars than most politicians currently find imaginable. **TAP**

— ROBERT KUTTNER

*Financial
and economic
recovery
will require
ideological
reversal.*



Check Yourself

ANN FRIEDMAN STATES ["Strength in Numbers," July/August 2008] that the achievement of one Pelosi or one Clinton (almost) is not enough to assure proper political influence for women so long as they are "stuck at the 25 percent barrier" and that the limit appears "in almost every professional field."

One place to apply that needed correction might be *The American Prospect* itself. The masthead shows what is essentially gender equality at the top, including the writer herself. But on the level of senior correspondents and contributing editors, who often provide much of the content of the magazine, the "25 percent barrier" is in effect. Perhaps the author could use her influence to change the situation right at home.

DANIEL MANN
Bethesda, MD

Going Public

IWANTED TO THANK ELYN Saks for her article about how having schizophrenia has affected her ["A Professor's Story," July/August

2008]. As someone who has schizoaffective disorder, bipolar type, I deeply appreciate her coming forward and putting a humanizing (and deeply accomplished) face on those of us who suffer from mental illnesses. This article will do a lot of good for a lot of people.

At the same time, I must take issue with some of the assumptions behind Sasha Abramsky's article "A Worthy Diversion" [July/August 2008]. Cracking down on crime (like the consensual adult prostitution and drug use Sally Judson was accused of) by labeling it a symptom of mental illness is a tool of social control.

As someone who was involuntarily hospitalized, who witnessed other patients

so heavily pacified and zombified with drugs that they could do nothing but sit and stare all day at the TV, I am not in favor of forced hospitalization or current mental hospitals in general.

One good thing that came of the hospitalization was that I got the medications I needed and am now working and living on my own. May we all get the help we need to make the contributions that we are capable of.

LYNN SCHRODER
Seattle, WA

Letters to the editor should be sent to letters@prospect.org or mailed to The Editors, The American Prospect, 1710 Rhode Island Ave., NW, 12th Floor, Washington, D.C. 20036.

FROM THE EXECUTIVE EDITOR

THE ELECTION IS STILL MONTHS AWAY, THE INAUGURATION of the next president another 84 days beyond that, but it's hard not to begin thinking about life after January 20, 2009. The first two years of a new political alignment (which we'll have even if John McCain wins the White House and Democrats hold a sizable congressional majority) are inevitably a thrilling, fascinating time, when a mandate for change collides with all the institutional forces that resist it. It will be a period in which this magazine will be indispensable, shining a light on the corner where politics and policy meet. I learned much of what I know about politics and policy in the first two years of the Clinton administration, when I worked in the Senate. It is these periods, far more than election years, that really set our nation's direction for decades thereafter.

Since that quick education on Capitol Hill in the 1990s, I've worked for a foundation and at a think tank, and since 2005, I've written a column for the *Prospect* called "The Out Years." (Another likely project for January: come up with a new name for the column.) With this issue, I become executive editor of the *Prospect*. I'd like to express my gratitude to Harold Meyerson for his time at the helm, and I look forward to his more frequent contributions to these pages as editor-at-large.

As Dana Goldstein and Ezra Klein demonstrate in this issue, one big difference between those early Clinton years and a potential Obama administration is that Obama—in contrast to his image as an insurgent, post-partisan force—has done more to build a robust, nationwide Democratic Party than any

candidate before him has. They write that his "operation was built to amass two different types of votes: those that will win Obama the election and those that will pass his legislation if he becomes president." But as Rick Perlstein argues in an accompanying piece, history shows that progress is made not by increments but in big, sweeping, ambitious moves.

Still, even with the expiration of conservatism as an ideology (see E.J. Dionne's review of four new books about the history of the right), an ambitious agenda will meet plenty of friction from within as well as outside the majority coalition: As Bob Kuttner shows, conventional wisdom about government spending and an "entitlement crisis," with backing from sensible centrists and congressional "Blue Dog" Democrats, may be a constraint on the next president's freedom to fix the economy. Eli Sanders' profile of successful Democrats in the Mountain West hints at a potential fissure between the pragmatists of that region and more ideological liberals elsewhere. And as strong as the Democratic Party may become, there are still issues on which it hasn't been able to speak with a single voice, as Kevin Carey shows in a piece detailing how Democrats have stumbled on education over the past decade.

These challenges, though, as Ben Brandzel notes in his article about the future of MoveOn.org, are very different and more complicated than those of the Bush years, when outraged opposition was an easy response. And so we look forward to watching them and writing about them in the years ahead. — MARK SCHMITT

Up Front



TOO AWESOME FOR MY VOTE

AS BARACK OBAMA, BACKLIT BY THE GOLDEN LIGHT of sunset, spoke to 200,000 cheering Germans in Berlin on July 24, the moment certainly looked to be a good one for his campaign. Maybe too good, said CNN correspondent Candy Crowley.

"I have to tell you that there is some danger here," she said after the speech. "Do people see him as too presumptuous, sort of trying to look like a president?"

A presidential candidate trying to look like a president—a high-risk strategy, indeed. Within a week of Crowley's comments, the McCain campaign released a new ad, "Celeb," taking aim at Obama's presumption in delivering big speeches to even bigger crowds. The spot begins with images of Obama from the Berlin speech juxtaposed against videos of Britney Spears and Paris Hilton—with whom Obama is frequently confused—as a female voice intones, "He's the biggest celebrity in the world."

The Republican National Committee has launched a Web site called Audacity Watch that compiles instances of Obama acting too much like a president, as evidenced by his creating a presidential transition team and pledging that he would not keep a TV in the Lincoln bedroom.

If Obama's excessively presidential behavior is a campaign problem, then what could be more reassuring than John McCain's stumbles and gaffes? As *The Daily Show's* John Oliver says, "The one thing that's more powerful than hope and change is pity."

CONVENTIONAL ENTERTAINMENT

Kanye West is known for his glow-in-the-dark concerts and his larger-than-life sunglasses—certainly better than for his political opinions. But West is one of a youngish group of stars who will perform at the Democratic Convention, joining hip-hop artist Wyclef Jean and N.E.R.D., a hip-hop group beloved by tight-jeaned, cigarette-smoking hipsters everywhere.



The scope of the generational transition in the Democratic Party is clear when we compare this year's entertainment to the lineup assembled for John Kerry's convention four years ago. Kerry's Golden Oldies included John Mellencamp, Willie Nelson, and Carole King. "You've Got a Friend" brought people back to the glory days of the Democratic Party—the early 1970s. Oh wait.

Republicans have yet to announce the musical guests for their convention. We hope they'll outdo their 2004 lineup, where the biggest name was Lee Anne Womack. With John McCain at the helm, the smart money is on a surprise appearance by Lawrence Welk.

OUGHTA' BE IN PICTURES

Karl Rove and Howard Wolfson have both found their ways to Fox in recent months, and with any luck, they will become the new versions of Tucker Carlson and Paul Begala, with gloves (and bowtie) off.

But what about the other members of the Bush administration, now facing a future of mass unemployment? With a track record like theirs, television may be their only refuge. If we might be so bold as to make some suggestions:

Donald Rumsfeld and Colin Powell have both been out of the public eye since leaving their Cabinet positions. Who better to revive *The Odd Couple*? "Rummy, your dirty socks are covering my Middle East maps!"

Scooter Libby's miraculous evasion of jail time makes him a great candidate for *Prison Break*.



ERIC PALMA; RUNE HELLESTAD / LANDOV

**THE QUESTION:
WHICH
AMBASSADORSHIP
WOULD YOU LIKE
UNDER A MCCAIN
ADMINISTRATION?**

"The Ottoman Empire. The Turks knew how to keep the Arabs occupied for hundreds of years."
—Lane Greene, correspondent, The Economist



"Czechoslovakia. McCain seems to have a soft spot for it."
—Ben Greenman, editor, The New Yorker

"New York City, which I hope and expect will secede from any country so stupid as to pick John McCain to be president."
—Eric Alterman, Media Matters for America

Scott McClellan might get a gig on *Gossip Girl*, where spilling secrets is more appreciated than it is in politics.

And Dick Cheney's unparalleled experience at court intrigue and Tower-of-London-period torture, not to mention his firsthand memories of the time, makes him the perfect addition to the cast of *The Tudors*.

TORIES FOR OBAMA

One of the revelations of Barack Obama's overseas journey is that John McCain is not necessarily the favored candidate of conservatives in other lands. In July, London's *Daily Telegraph* asked the conservative members of the British Parliament who they were supporting in the American presidential race. Of those that responded, 63 backed McCain, but 28 supported Obama, and 22 more denied a preference. Douglas Carswell, the member of parliament for Harwich, gushed that Obama was "Edmund Burke.com," and Sir Malcolm Rifkind, a former foreign secretary, said he supports Obama because America "needs change."

Obama's trip abroad brought out the hope in conservative politicians from Berlin to Tel Aviv. Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany called him "well-equipped—physically, mentally, and politically." President Nicolas Sarkozy

of France referred to Obama as "my pal," adding that he'd be "delighted" if Obama won. And while not an Obama man himself, die-hard Mideast hawk

Benjamin Netanyahu, the Likud party leader and ex-prime minister, fawned over Obama's dubbing of Israel's security as "sacrosanct."

As Obama finished up his

trip in London, Tory leader David Cameron paid heed to his care and feeding. "You should be on a beach," Cameron urged. "You need a break."

PARODY by T. A. Frank

Preemptive Presidential Pardons

MONICA GOODLING

Offense: Politicized hiring and firing at Department of Justice

Presidential statement: I know that some folks are mad still about the hard work Monica did. I also know that Monica asked job-seekers what things about George W. Bush made them want to serve him. I don't see what's political about that and think it is a good question. In fact, I think it should become standard in most job interviews in America, replacing "Where do you see yourself in five years?" Monica is also a fox. I fully pardon her.

KARL ROVE

Offense: Political firings and political prosecutions at DOJ

Presidential statement: Turd Blossom is a good man, and I don't want all these investigations getting drug out. He has an important message to send to us all about how John McCain's opponent may be a Muslim and a Black Panther with a

God complex. I therefore fully pardon Karl.

ALBERTO GONZALES

Offense: Torture, illegal DOJ hiring and firing, wiretapping

Presidential statement: I know some folks are saying Gonzales this and Gonzales that. But I don't know how anyone could look Fredo in the eye and stay mad at the fella. With that thick black hair and that adorable, Labrador-retriever expression, Fredo could go out and catch and eat a baby and I know I'd still wanna give him a big old kiss and a new baby to practice on. Pardon him? Hell, I just want to give him a bone and hug him.

JOHN WEAVER

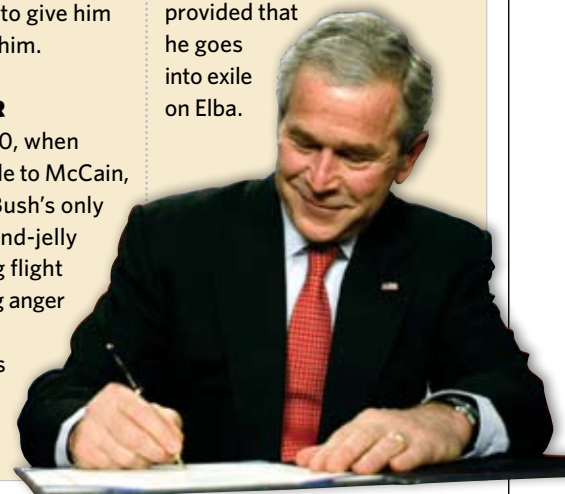
Offense: In 2000, when serving as an aide to McCain, ate George W. Bush's only peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich during flight to Texas, causing anger

Presidential statement: I was real mad at John

Weaver there for a minute. Still am. He's a major-league asshole. But like all Americans under my presidency, John Weaver has suffered greatly already. So I forgive him and order him released.

JACQUES CHIRAC

Offense: Irritating, French
Presidential statement: Now, I respect that good people can disagree about Jacques Chirac, although they cannot disagree a lot. A few years ago, I issued an executive order to bunker-bust Jacques. But since our action was not successful, I am now pardoning him, provided that he goes into exile on Elba.



T.A. Frank is an Irvine Fellow at the New America Foundation.

Big-Picture Power

BY MARK SCHMITT

A FEW YEARS AGO, WHEN I WAS INVOLVED IN A project to build broad coalitions of progressive organizations at the state level, there was a fad among these groups to do a “power analysis” of the political conditions in their states and create a plan to “build power”

for their causes and constituencies.

At the time I wondered, wasn’t “building power” what they *were* doing? But the answer was that a lot of progressive organizations, especially those structured as nonprofits, had been kind of uncomfortable with the idea of power. They didn’t think in those terms. Their theory was that putting persuasive information in front of policy-makers or getting courts to issue injunctions to stop bad things would be sufficient. Their counterparts in electoral politics thought winning elections was the end of the fight.

To the extent they had a theory of power, it was limited to the idea that when there was a public decision to be made—an election, a ballot initiative, a piece of legislation—someone should mobilize to affect the decision. This is what sociologist Steven Lukes calls “one-dimensional power.” It is centered on the question of who wins a fight. It neglects the second dimension: Who decides which issues are up for decision and which are not? And there’s a third aspect of power, which involves deeper questions about ideology, the definition of problems, and shared assumptions about what’s possible. Ideas that go almost unchallenged, such as that government spending is a long-term crisis or that environmental protections cost jobs, can exercise a quiet power that protects certain interests.

The intended audience for Lukes’ 1974

book, *Power: A Radical View*, was not activists, it was academics. Lukes was criticizing the one-dimensional view of power in mainstream political science at the time. But over the decades, a simplified version of his radical view, often known as “The Three Faces of Power,” caught on in activist circles. I’ve seen some organizations go through the revelatory exercise of figuring out not just how to affect decisions but how to put new issues on the agenda and then how to challenge prevailing ideologies and assumptions.

Whether they used Lukes’ language or not (and most did not), much of the organizational transformation in the progressive world over the last decade, from the Netroots to the Center for American Progress, has involved understanding the limits of the old approach. Instead of hoping to win elections and lobbying for good bills and against bad ones, progressive organizations are finally becoming more conscious about setting the agenda and fighting for a worldview.

We now face the possibility that a progressive Democrat will win the White House this November, bringing

with him a solidly supportive Congress. If that happens, of course, it is a victory in the first dimension—the formal power to make decisions. The last time it happened, 16 years ago, most progressives assumed that good policies would follow automatically. Today, progressives have an infinitely higher level of sophistication about power: Already, tens of millions of dollars are being amassed to mobilize people behind a push for universal health care—a grassroots effort no one even thought about undertaking in 1993.

It is also possible, as Ezra Klein and Dana Goldstein suggest elsewhere in this issue, that a victory by Barack Obama, built on the foundation of a strong and coherent Democratic Party mobilizing citizens in 50 states, will bring with it the second dimension of power. This would allow progressives to set the terms of debate, not just next year but over the decade to come. Perhaps instead of fighting about tax cuts and tax increases, we’ll fight for a broad, positive agenda of economic security for families and

a new role for the U.S. in the world, and revenues will become, once again, a consequence of other decisions.

And there’s the faintest hope that, as the debacle of recent American foreign policy and the breakdown of our economy come together to melt away the last remnants of conservative ideology, we can even change the third dimension of power. To borrow a phrase from the economist Jared Bernstein, we might move from a “You’re On Your Own” society to one in which “We’re In

This Together” becomes the underlying assumption of public policy.

The interesting question is not what happens in November but whether progressives can be smart enough about all three dimensions of power to take advantage of the opportunity. **TAP**

*Instead of just
working to
win elections,
progressives
are finally
setting the
agenda and
fighting for a
worldview.*

The Generation Trap

BY ANN FRIEDMAN

MOST YOUNG PROGRESSIVES HAVE HEARD IT AT one point or another: the complaint that our generation is less active and engaged than the baby boomers were. As Phyllis Chesler (author of *The Death of Feminism*) told *USA Today* in 2006, “I think that to be a feminist in

our time, it was very easy.” She continued, “By the 1980s—and certainly into the ’90s—it became very not fashionable to be a feminist because it was equated with being a man-hater, a loser, an angry person. They’ll say, ‘I’m not one of those feminists, but I’m for equal rights.’”

Quotations like these are often accompanied by black-and-white photos of women holding banners in the streets. It’s true that we don’t often see images of student-led Iraq War protests and boycotts of companies that violate human rights in today’s newspapers. But actions like these *are* taking place, and a whole new activist world is flourishing online.

That’s why I can’t seem to work up the same despair that some older liberals clearly feel. Feminism has always been driven by a small, core group of activists. Liberals rightly criticize conservatives who idealize the 1950s as an era when everything was perfect, with stay-at-home wives, picket fences, and dads smoking cigars. But those on the left commit the same error when they reminisce about activism in previous decades, particularly the 1960s, and declare it more vibrant and more effective than youth activism today.

Maybe I’m a pessimist, but I don’t believe that the number of people who self-identify as feminists—or anti-war or labor-rights activists—will *ever* be that huge. And I’m not sure it’s even a primary goal of feminism to simply get more people to *call* themselves feminists. The

goal is really for feminist ideas to become mainstream and for feminist policies to be enacted. The fact that many young women are pro-choice, desire equality in personal relationships and in the workplace, and are politically engaged yet don’t use the word “feminist” to describe themselves does not signal a crisis to me. It represents progress and opportunity.

The task for young activists now is to convince our peers that there’s still a long road ahead, whereas in previous generations activists were convincing one another to start walking. It can be tricky to articulate both how far we’ve come and how far we have to go. In a 2005 speech, Barack Obama addressed this conundrum, saying of feminism, “One of the most remarkable achievements of this very American movement has been to forge a consensus around this ideal of equal opportunity.” He acknowledged that this progress can be exploited by those who want to argue we’ve already come far enough but that the consensus around equality, in and of itself, represents a success.

Today’s social-justice activists start with very different conditions than those

that existed in the 1960s. Yes, the student protests against the Vietnam War shook the country to its core. But it’s not hard to connect the dots between the absence of a draft for the Iraq War and the lack of ongoing protest today. During second-wave feminism’s formative years, abortion was inaccessible to much broader swathes of the country. Today abortion is a legal right, if a precarious one. Young women on modern college campuses are unlikely to know someone who has had a back-alley abortion, and let’s face it: The activists who garner the most media coverage are middle- and upper-class students. It’s both a good and a bad thing that it’s harder to motivate these young people today. Good because fewer people are affected by these injustices; bad because those who *are* affected are predominantly the least privileged.

Some of these themes, especially where feminism is concerned, came to the fore during the Democratic primary. In one *Washington Post* article, a Wellesley student recalled telling her Hillary Clinton-supporting mother she was backing Obama: “She started telling me about

how our generation takes for granted a lot of advances that women have made.”

Last year at an event for pro-choice youth, I saw one Hillary supporter, Gloria Steinem, say she was pleased to hear that some young women take their rights for granted. That’s what we were working for, she said, so *you* could start from a place far ahead of where *we* did, and advance the

cause of feminism even further. Ironically, this rationale is part of why so many young women and men are drawn to Obama. He called on voters to start from what we’ve achieved and look forward. In a Democratic Party long defined by the successes and upheavals of the 1960s, it was a radical statement. **TAP**

Liberals rightly criticize conservatives who idealize the 1950s. But those on the left commit the same error when they reminisce about 1960s activism.

It's His Party

Barack Obama might be running on a post-partisan platform, but he is more focused on building the Democratic Party than any other candidate in recent history.

BY DANA GOLDSTEIN AND EZRA KLEIN

A n unassuming building at 430 South Capitol Street, in a forlorn corner between the Capitol and a highway overpass, is the home address of the Democratic Party. But though mail still gets delivered to the Washington, D.C., address, many of the Democratic National Committee's employees—the men and women who make up the party's central infrastructure—are no longer around to receive it. They are in Chicago, where Barack Obama moved them after he captured the Democratic Party's nomination.

It was a peculiar decision for Obama, who had built his campaign, and even his political identity, around an eloquently stated, post-partisan revulsion with the divisiveness of modern party politics. Following the strategy of “outsider” candidates before him, Obama set his headquarters outside the District in order to create distance, both physical and perceptual, between himself and the consultants, interest groups, party hacks, and congressional busybodies who populate the nation's capital.

The effort was so successful that some feared the Obama phenomenon—the millions of young people passionate about his campaign, the thousands who have lined roadsides just to wave at the Illinois senator's motorcade—had become a force unto itself, indifferent to the fortunes of the traditional Democratic Party, unbound by a commitment to progressive ideology, and wholly dependent on the character of Barack Obama. As blogger Matt Stoller writes on OpenLeft.com, “Power and money in the Democratic Party is being centralized around a key iconic figure. [Obama] is consolidating power within the party.”

This was a new critique of Obama: not that he was beyond parties but that he had personalized them. That rather than building the Democratic Party, he was building an Obama Party, with all the good and bad that that centralization entailed. Though some were nervous when Obama sent the moving trucks to South Capitol Street, further tightening his hold over the party apparatus, the relocation neatly fit the broader, and rather unexpected, reality of this campaign: For all the talk of post-partisan “unity,” Barack Obama has been proving himself the most party-focused presidential candi-

date in recent history—possibly ever. Paradoxically, although Obama's success has been more dependent on personal charisma than any recent nominee's has, he's been leveraging that charisma to build a broader Democratic infrastructure less dependent on the presidential nominee.

This should be no surprise. Though Obama himself is a newcomer to Washington, the upper echelons of his Senate and campaign staff are populated almost exclusively by experienced Democratic Party operatives. Continuity with the established party infrastructure is a defining characteristic of the Obama campaign. When Hillary Clinton conceded the nomination, Obama's first major staff change was not the incorporation of a former Clinton operative meant to heal the divisions of the primary, nor the elevation of a national-security graybeard meant to reassure general-election voters of Obama's commander-in-chief credentials. Rather, it was to install Paul Tewes, the skilled organizer who served as the architect of Obama's crucial victory in Iowa, at the DNC to head up the committee's election-year efforts. A few weeks later, it was announced that the DNC would cease accepting contributions from lobbyists or political action committees.

Then it came out that much of the DNC was moving to Chicago. In the months that have followed, the Obama campaign has announced plans for training camps that will turn out thousands of new organizers dedicated to electing Democrats, and has signaled that it will spend millions in blood-red states where Democrats haven't seriously invested in building party infrastructure for decades. The campaign has constructed a fundraising machine based around small-donors that promises to end the age-old competition for dollars between different wings of the Democratic establishment, enabling the creation of a unified electoral strategy. It has argued that “real change” requires the sort of legislative successes that only a strong congressional party can produce. In short, the candidate running on his exhaustion with traditional party politics has directed his campaign to build a new kind of Democratic Party—one that may put to shame anything that came before it.

The aftermath of the 2002 elections was a low point for the Democratic Party. Much of the blame fell on the shoulders of Tom Daschle and Dick Gephardt, the Senate and House party leaders judged responsible not just for the political failure of losing seats in the midterm election but for graver substantive deficiencies: Gephardt was complicit, some would say crucial, in George W. Bush's disastrous invasion of Iraq. Daschle was, at best, ineffectual against it. Both paid for those failings. In 2004, distracted by events in Washington, Daschle lost to Republican John Thune, and Gephardt retired after losing the Democratic presidential primary to John Kerry. Their staffs paid, too; come January of 2005, the experienced legislative tacticians and political operatives who had served the party's congressional leadership found themselves abruptly unemployed.

The bright spot of the 2004 election was the emergence of a brilliant, charismatic, young African American politician named Barack Obama. Obama burst onto the scene with a keynote speech at the Democratic Convention that would probably be remembered as little more than a neat piece of oratory if Kerry hadn't lost and congressional Democrats hadn't been wiped out. But, in a dark moment for Democrats, Obama was one of the very few points of light. Which is probably how he got a meeting with Pete Rouse in the first place.

Often called "the 101st Senator," Rouse, an understated 62-year-old with 30-odd years of Capitol Hill experience, had been Tom Daschle's powerful chief of staff. When Daschle was ejected from the Senate, he hoped Rouse would continue to work with him in the private sector. But Rouse received an expected call from Cassandra Butts, the policy director on Dick Gephardt's 2004 presidential campaign and an old law school chum of Obama's. Butts asked Rouse to meet with the newly elected Obama. Grudgingly, Rouse had lunch with the young senator. Obama asked him to sign on as chief of staff—a demotion of sorts, dropping Rouse from the office of the most powerful Senate Democrat to that of the most junior member of the body. Rouse politely declined. Obama kept asking. Eventually, Rouse accepted.

Most outsider candidates for the presidency recruit an outsider team to deliver it. Bill Clinton's main strategists in 1992 were the little-known Paul Begala and James Carville. His first chief of staff was Mack McLarty, a childhood friend who had risen to become chairman of the Arkansas Democratic Party. It was a team untainted by Washington but also unschooled in how Washington worked.

The Obama campaign and Senate staff, by contrast, are full of Daschle and Gephardt veterans—an unexpected rebirth of the power bases and reputations of two politicians who had long been written off. Obama's chief of staff is the aforementioned Daschle associate, Pete Rouse. His deputy campaign manager, Steve Hildebrand, managed Daschle's 2004 campaign. His director for battleground states, Jennifer O'Malley Dillon, and his director of communications, Dan Pfeiffer, were both deputy campaign

managers for Daschle in 2004. Obama's foreign-policy director, Denis McDonough, was Daschle's foreign-policy adviser, and his finance director, Julianna Smoot, was head of Daschle's PAC. Many of those who didn't come from the Senate minority leader's office came from the House minority leader's office. Obama's campaign manager, David Plouffe, was Gephardt's deputy campaign manager in 2004. His head of delegate operations, Jeff Berman, played the same role for Gephardt. His national press secretary, Bill Burton, was Gephardt's Iowa press secretary. Dozens of others come from related arms of the party, in particular the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee.

It's a tremendous operation for a first-term senator who hadn't worked a day in Washington before 2004. But it's exactly the team you'd expect a former chief of staff to the Senate minority leader to construct. "The person most responsible for this was

Obama's strategy is not simply down-ballot organizing. It's a way to create large national majorities years down the line.

Pete Rouse," says Tom Daschle, sounding almost wistful. After all, Obama's campaign was in part based on plans Rouse had drawn up for Daschle in 2004, before Daschle decided to sit out the presidential race. The Obama staff's familiarity with the workings of the party and comfort with its procedures proved crucial in the primaries. Obama won the nomination largely because his team better understood the byzantine mechanics by which the Democratic Party chooses its nominee: The campaign used proportional-apportionment rules to hold down Clinton's delegate totals in large states and pumped resources into caucus states to run up Obama's delegate numbers. The Obama campaign succeeded, in other words, through a superior respect for the party's internal infrastructure.

HISTORICALLY, THE DEMOCRATIC Party has operated less as a strong party than as an uncertain coalition. It has been regionally fractured, racially divided, ideologically torn, and economically disparate, frustrating those who believed that voting for the more-left party should further a progressive policy agenda. A broad ideological range is good for constructing raw congressional majorities but tricky when you're trying to reconcile the fiscal conservatism of the Blue Dogs with the social investment favored by liberals. Rather than acting as a single institution united around a common agenda, the party was all too often a nominal nation-state in which sets of warring fiefdoms protected their properties and sought expansion.

By the early 1990s, this incoherence had left the party bereft of a single agenda and full of tired incumbents interested in little but the protection of their own power and patrons. As a result, the Democratic brand had turned toxic, a scarlet D that national candidates had to hide or publicly burn off. "I was the polling adviser for the Democratic Leadership Council back then," says pollster Stan Greenberg. "Clinton's candidacy, and that effort, was very much focused on addressing the historical

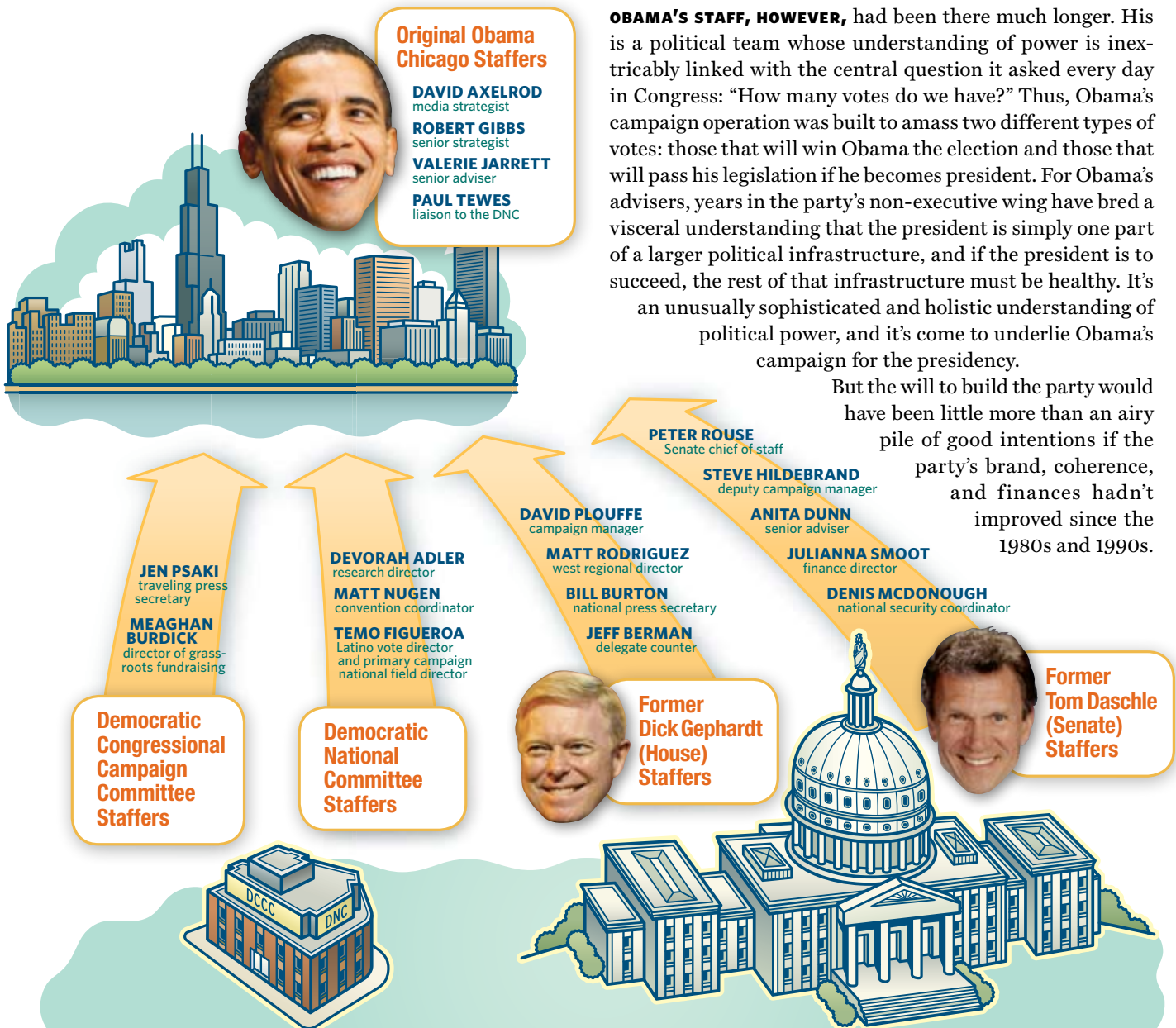
problems of the Democratic Party.” Those problems included a long-standing perception that the party was soft on crime, captured by an array of entrenched interest groups, fiscally profligate, and, at least in Congress, simply corrupt. Before Clinton could build a new image of the party, however, he had to get elected. That meant not strengthening the party but holding it at arm’s length, except as a useful vehicle for fundraising. This was explicit in his campaign: Clinton ran as a “New Democrat,” a symbolic break from the actual Democratic Party—especially its liberal wing.

That strategy had its logic, but it also had its drawbacks. “Clinton became very identified with the presidential wing of the party,” says a former member of Clinton’s famed campaign war room. “But there was a lot of resentment from the

Daschle and Gephardt people to the way they were treated by the Clinton people. I think the people who acted in Clinton’s name didn’t generate an awful lot of goodwill for them.” This wasn’t widely understood until 2008, when Hillary Clinton ran for president only to find that the party’s leadership was devoid of individuals with any connection or loyalty to her husband’s administration. Of the three most powerful Democrats—Nancy Pelosi, Harry Reid, and Howard Dean—none could be considered Clintonites, and Dean’s ascension was, in many ways, an explicit repudiation of the Clintons. The cool relationship between the Clintons and the leadership continued down into Congress. “Obama got more Senate endorsements than Hillary did,” continues the Clinton insider. “That’s incredible. The guy’s been there for three fucking years!”

OBAMA’S STAFF, HOWEVER, had been there much longer. His is a political team whose understanding of power is inextricably linked with the central question it asked every day in Congress: “How many votes do we have?” Thus, Obama’s campaign operation was built to amass two different types of votes: those that will win Obama the election and those that will pass his legislation if he becomes president. For Obama’s advisers, years in the party’s non-executive wing have bred a visceral understanding that the president is simply one part of a larger political infrastructure, and if the president is to succeed, the rest of that infrastructure must be healthy. It’s an unusually sophisticated and holistic understanding of political power, and it’s come to underlie Obama’s campaign for the presidency.

But the will to build the party would have been little more than an airy pile of good intentions if the party’s brand, coherence, and finances hadn’t improved since the 1980s and 1990s.



STAFF MIGRATION TO THE OBAMA CAMPAIGN D.C. ➤ CHICAGO

A fairly good indicator of the health of a party is the attitudes of young voters who are being exposed to it for the first time. In the 1990s, Generation X was coming of political age, and according to polls conducted by the Pew Research group, Republicans held a 1 percent edge in party identification. In 2008, it is Generation Y that is choosing political allegiances for the first time, and these under-30-somethings show an astonishing 24 percent preference for the Democrats. Even Generation X, which gave Republicans a 3 percent edge as recently as 2004, now prefers Democrats by a margin of 12 percent. In sharp contrast to the early 1990s, it is Republicans who now have a nominee best known for his apostasies against his own party. Democrats don't have to run from their party anymore. And so Obama hasn't. Rather, he has run against polarization, against legislative gridlock, against special interests. This is why he could bring the DNC to Chicago: The problem isn't Democrats. It's the atmosphere and working relationships that impede their work in Washington.

There's also a sense that the party is more ideologically unified than it has been in the past. "There's no center-left divide in this nominating fight," says Rep. Artur Davis of Alabama. "All the candidates lined up within 20 yards of each other on virtually every question. That is an important, interesting change that shouldn't be overlooked in the Democratic Party." It is, in part, the function of being in the opposition. But it's also the product of the electoral realignment of the last 15 years, in which white Southerners moved solidly into the Republican bloc

and socially liberal suburbanites finally became Democrats.

Money has also proven a powerful unifying force. Partly as a result of the party's increasing health, and partly as a result of the birth of Internet-driven small-donor democracy, the party and many of its candidates suddenly found themselves flush with funds. "Fundraising was a zero-sum game for a significant part of the Democratic Party's recent history," says Davis. During the 1990s, the Clintons had worked assiduously to build out the party's capacity for fundraising, putting legendary moneyman Terry McAuliffe in charge of the Democratic National Committee. "Clinton viewed the DNC and the party in general as a vehicle for fundraising and media," says Mike Lux, a former special assistant to Clinton. It was an outlook born of the pre-McCain-Feingold period, in which Democratic candidates were strapped for cash, while the DNC was free of many of the current legal restrictions on fundraising. That spurred candidates to treat the party as an ATM of sorts, responsible for generating as much cash as possible, from any source willing to donate.

This cycle, the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee has raised over \$70 million. The Democratic National Committee has raised over \$80 million. The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee has raised over \$100 million. And Obama has raised almost \$330 million, much of it from small donors. "When you were raising your money mostly through large donors and PACs, there was a continual sense that there was a limited amount of money that could be raised, and if you spent it now, you couldn't spend it later," Greenberg says. "Now

Where Do We Move When America MovesOn?

Victory could pose an existential challenge for the grass-roots groups that arose in opposition to Bush. A MoveOn.org veteran examines the challenge and its opportunities.

BY BEN BRANDZEL

If Barack Obama wins the presidency in November, the United States will officially enter a new political era. We'll finally have a president who, like most Americans, opposes the "dumb" decision to invade Iraq, unapologetically insists on universal health care, and calls global warming "one of the greatest moral challenges of our generation." The climate of fear will give way to hope and a real opportunity to move the country forward.

This transformation is what so many of us have been fight-

ing for over the last 10 years of Gingrich-Bush-Rove-dominated politics. But, ironically, a brand-new context could pose an existential challenge for the independent grass-roots forces that helped to get us here. Groups like MoveOn.org that were born and bred in an era of opposition will have to act fast to avoid a weakening of outsider progressive pressure just when we need it the most.

LIKE MANY IN MY generation, I came to political consciousness wondering what our

government was thinking. I was 14 when Newt Gingrich's Republicans seized Congress, 15 when they shut down the government, and 18 when they impeached President Clinton over an affair.

Around that time, I met an unnervingly mild-mannered software entrepreneur named Wes Boyd. We served together on the board of my old elementary school, where his two children were current students. Wes was no political operative. In fact, serving on the Berkeley Montessori School Board of Trustees was the high point of his civic leadership to date, and it was such a big leap that he was nervous to speak at meetings.

It turned out that Wes and everyone he knew was also wondering what those guys in Washington were thinking—

and why Democrats seemed to be taking it lying down. So, 10 years ago this month, Wes and his wife Joan Blades asked friends and family to sign a simple, nonpartisan petition asking Congress to censure President Clinton and "MoveOn" to the pressing business facing the country.

Within a few months, nearly half a million people from across all 50 states signed the petition. Wes and Joan never intended to start an organization. But once all these people came together, the calls to do so proved irresistible.

I joined the MoveOn team in 2003, first as co-founder of the student arm and then as advocacy director. After watching the Bush administration in action, like millions of others my questioning shifted from "what are they think-

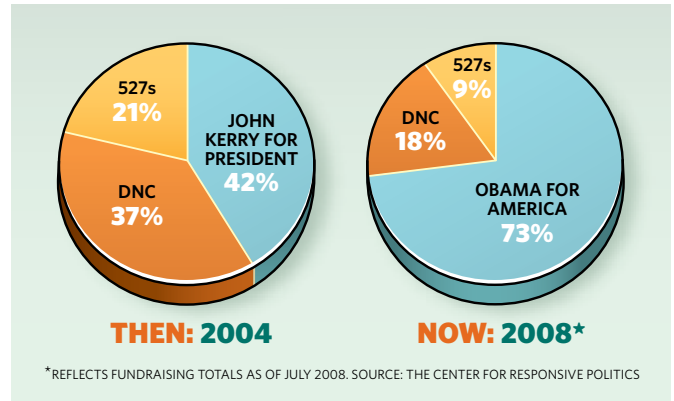
there's a totally different view of money: the more you spend, the more you raise." That view, however, is not the work of Barack Obama. It is the work of his predecessor, Howard Dean.

IF BARACK OBAMA IS, in some ways, the accidental beneficiary of the long-delayed strong-party opportunity, he is also succeeding because he, and the party veterans who surround him, understand the moment's promise and consciously chose a strategy capable of fulfilling it.

Their approach has amounted to picking sides in what has been an unusually bitter battle over the correct strategic direction for the party. In 2004, John Kerry ran as the nominee of an impoverished, regionally fractured Democratic Party. The Democratic National Committee was still headed by a Clinton loyalist, Terry McAuliffe. Though Howard Dean had run a revolutionary primary campaign, using the Internet to mobilize grass-roots support and attract more small donations than ever before, the party's Beltway apparatus seemed more frightened than inspired by his example. In the meantime, congressional candidates across the country were forced to compete with one another for the attention and resources of the DNC, which was working off of a small list of swing states targeted by Kerry's people and McAuliffe.

Chris Gates, chair of the Colorado Democratic Party from 2003 to 2005, remembers the resentments bred by the party's targeting plan. The Kerry campaign painted a big red bull's-eye on Colorado, in no small part due to the efforts of Gates, who understood

WHO'S RAISING THE MONEY?



that being "targeted" could mean the difference between map-changing victories and down-the-ballot losses. The DNC set up dozens of field offices in Colorado and flooded the state with hundreds of staff and volunteers. The Kerry campaign ran television and radio advertisements there, and although Kerry lost Colorado by about five points, Democrats picked up a Senate seat with Ken Salazar and a House seat with his brother, John Salazar—one of only two Democratic House pick-ups that year.

"We benefited from the thing people complained about, which was that Kerry was hardcore about targeting," recalls Gates. "If you were targeted, you got everything you needed, and if you weren't, you got nothing. People who weren't target-

ing?" to "what can I do to stop them?" I've come to think of these first 10 years of MoveOn as the "Oh No You Don't" era of progressive organizing. In this era, the headlines have been consistently filled with one outrage after another: deception about Iraq, the illegal spying program, extremist judicial nominees, Social Security privatization, saber rattling with Iran—the list is endless. "Oh No You Don't" organizing responds to this environment by using the Internet to transform the quick, high-energy consensus about what we're against into rapid, coordinated action.

Unlike traditional single-issue organizations, where members generally sign up as environmentalists or civil liberties activists to support the good work of their chosen

group, the MoveOn model is based on members taking direct action themselves on whatever issue is most pressing. The model fit the moment; almost 10 million people have taken at least one action (signed a petition, written a member of Congress, voted in an internal poll) through MoveOn—and more than 3.2 million people keep an active membership today. Millions of others have acted through similar groups that expanded on the new model in their own ways.

In just a few months time, the "Oh No You Don't" era may come to an end and with it, the endless supply of blood-boiling, quick-consensus headlines that have largely fueled our work so far. But the task of creating progressive change has only begun. So

what comes next, and what organizing model will fit the new moment?

Of course, in the new era, "Oh No You Don't" organizing will still have a place. Right-wing and corporate forces will do everything they can to block our agenda on things like universal health care and climate change. That's when we'll need the outrage.

But when the overriding political insanity that MoveOn.org was built to remedy has finally passed, what will remain? Profoundly serious and urgent real-world problems: the tanking economy, climate change, Iraq, national security, and poverty, just for starters.

If blocking efforts to make things worse animated the last era, initiating efforts to make things better must animate the

new era: "Oh No You Don't" becomes "Oh Yes We Do."

The question for MoveOn.org and our counterparts is whether we can help America find the political will for solutions as huge as the problems we face.

No president can generate that kind of will on his or her own. As outsiders, our job will be to put maximum pressure on President Obama and Congress to be bold, to give them maximum support when they are, to hold them accountable when they aren't, and to be smart enough to know the difference.

This mission requires a strong outsider force, but the new era poses challenges to our independence. For the first time in our short history, an activist progressive agenda will be put forward *within* the

ed were pretty bitter being told that if they wanted buttons they had to go to the Kerry Web site and buy them,” Gates says. “As good as it was for Colorado, it wasn’t a sustainable model.”

Backlash took the form of Howard Dean’s 2005 campaign to become DNC chair, which was calibrated to answer the frustrations of party activists in states written off by the party establishment. Dean promised a “50-State Strategy” in which the DNC would send paid organizers to every state in the nation, even to the Deep South. Not every state would receive the same resources—swing states like Ohio, Nevada, and Florida would

tomed to the party’s more traditional role. In 2006, Rahm Emanuel, then-chair of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, got into a screaming match with Dean over the 50-State Strategy. Emanuel, whose outlook was typical of former members of the Bill Clinton war room, was furious because he didn’t feel Dean was raising enough to justify spending dollars in states Democrats had no chance at winning. Dean was organizing when he should have been fundraising.

Dean saw things differently. As an insurgent candidate in 2004, he had outraised the scions of the establishment

with ease, riding an enthused base to a huge cash advantage. His comportment at the DNC reflected his residual trust in that base: If the party spoke to its supporters, the money would be there. Dean was

Bill Clinton sought to change the party’s ideas; Obama is more interested in building the party’s infrastructure. But for what?

still be the subjects of intense targeting efforts—but every state would receive something.

The theory was simple: Dean believed winning county-executive and school-board races today would mean winning congressional seats and electoral college votes in coming years. He believed the DNC was well situated to focus on the party’s long-term future rather than its short-term fortunes; it just needed the courage to do so. Grass-roots Democratic activists agreed, electing Dean chair.

Dean’s vision brought him into conflict with those accus-

proved right. The party picked up 31 House and six Senate seats in the 2006 midterm elections, and many 50-State skeptics became supporters.

Among those watching was the Obama team. Obama’s field operation essentially implemented a 50-State Strategy modified for the primary season. So in part, it was no surprise that once he clinched the nomination, Obama chose to keep Dean in place as DNC chair, even as he merged the DNC into his own campaign. The two men have been remarkably in sync. “I am proud of the fact that we’re the first campaign in a generation

establishment. The temptation to come inside, to utilize our friends and allies who suddenly hold power in order to push from within, deferring to the agenda-setting power and bully pulpit of the new establishment, will be strong. Obama’s credibility with grass-roots progressives will at least initially make any direct confrontation more difficult than challenging the previous administration. And Obama’s own vast e-mail list will be attractive in itself—imagine those millions added on to MoveOn’s base.

Part of what makes the MoveOn model so different from older, single-issue groups is that it is entirely member-driven—right down to the question of what issues we work on. The new temptation to work on the inside, bargaining with our friends and allies

in the White House and Congress, is threatening not only to the outsider political strategy but to that crucial connection to the members. So how do we stay independent and energized in this new environment in order to push a friendly government to do more?

FORTUNATELY, WE’RE not the first country where progressives have gone from opposition to power in the Internet era.

For the last 11 years, Australians suffered under the Bush-like administration of Prime Minister John Howard. As in the U.S., a new generation of high-tech, action-based opposition emerged, including GetUp.org.au, which was based on the MoveOn model and now has even more members per capita.

In the 2007 election, GetUp members played a big role in toppling Howard and replacing him with the relatively progressive Kevin Rudd. Now our friends Down Under have had nine months to grapple with the challenge of pushing the popular new government to “go big.”

After the election, GetUp members gathered in hundreds of local meetings to dream up their top priorities for a “People’s Agenda,” much of which found its way into the high-profile of several Parliament members’ “maiden speeches.” When GetUp hired an economist to cost out the major priorities, some of the findings were used in Rudd’s first budget. It’s a great example of how to form the harder, slower consensus about what we’re for and of how to shape

the agenda from the outside. The MoveOn “Positive Agenda” developed in 2006 sets a precedent for what can be done in the U.S. GetUp played an even more imaginative role in the campaign for reconciliation between white and indigenous Australians. Before the election, GetUp campaigned for the new Parliament to issue a long overdue apology to the members of the “stolen generation”—indigenous children taken by the Australian government as recently as 1971 to be raised in white society. And in February, that’s exactly what happened. But after winning the capacity to do more, the group’s members believed it was only the first step toward the greater reconciliation Australia needed. So GetUp members took the challenge into their own hands.

to run a 50-State Strategy,” Obama told the Netroots Nation convention in Austin, Texas, in a taped statement. “Not a 50 percent-plus-one strategy, but a 50-State Strategy made possible by the volunteer activism and organizing you and others have made on the ground and support by Governor Dean’s efforts at the DNC.”

Meanwhile, the Obama campaign’s most aggressive effort to influence the down-ticket races that Democrats traditionally ignore is playing out in solidly Republican Texas. In June, Obama sent his chief strategist, David Axelrod, to Houston to deliver an important message to Texas Democratic funders. The Obama campaign had decided, Axelrod announced to a crowd of 250 at the downtown Wortham Center, to send 15 paid staffers to the state and organize thousands of volunteers to get out the vote, an unprecedented commitment of resources to the Lone Star State from a Democratic presidential campaign. The goal isn’t for Obama to win Texas’ 34 electoral votes. Rather, by registering Democrats, Obama hopes to help the Texas Democratic Party regain control of its state legislature, which would allow Democrats to redistrict the state’s congressional delegation for 2010, potentially winning House seats in the process. That’s not simply down-ballot organizing—it’s *way* down-ballot organizing, reaching into state legislatures to influence coming congressional reapportionments in order to create large national majorities years down the line. Obama, looking ahead to governing with as large a congressional majority as possible, is determined to take advantage of a population boom in the

Houston area, which is increasingly dominated by immigrants.

At times, the campaign’s down-ticket energy takes on a life of its own. Jeremy Bird, field director for Obama’s record-breaking victory in South Carolina, likes to tell the story of Stephen Wukela. Wukela, an attorney in his early 30s, was an Obama neighborhood team leader in Florence, South Carolina. Energized by his work with the campaign, Wukela decided to challenge Frank Willis, the 13-year incumbent mayor of Florence. It seemed a quixotic idea, but Wukela tapped into the activist network built by Obama’s organizers, ran a campaign straight out of his hero’s playbook (“a Real Democrat for Real Change”), and won—by a single vote. “It shows what we were able to do,” says Bird, “which is not only win, but leave something behind, so we can begin to turn South Carolina blue in the years to come.”

OF COURSE, OBAMA’S party-building may not be successful in winning him the presidency, and there are still skeptics within the Democratic Party who question some of his tactics. There has been some grouching from congressional Democrats that the Obama campaign isn’t coordinating with them enough and has a tendency toward insularity. The 50-State Strategy remains controversial, particularly with those Democrats who were seared by the experiences of Florida in 2000 and Ohio in 2004. They see it as a waste of money and staff time.

Chris Gates, the former Colorado Democratic Party chair, says that Obama has smoothed over tensions in the Democratic Party about field organizing but that fault lines still exist



First, they placed outside the Parliament building thousands of candles that spelled out: “Sorry: The first step.”

GetUp members next helped fund travel to Canberra for stolen-generation victims who were too poor to make the trip on their own—contributing more for the effort than for any other fundraiser in GetUp’s history. GetUp also produced a song drawing on clips from Rudd’s address (similar to the will.i.am remix of Obama’s “Yes we can” speech). The song debuted at No. 2 on the

electronic-singles chart, second only to Madonna.

In April, GetUp members hosted a well-covered national round of “Reconciliation Get-Togethers,” bringing white and indigenous Australians together in over 350 living rooms to begin weaving together the strained threads of Australian society.

Taken together, it was a brilliant piece of political jujitsu, an illustration of how independent progressives can take the momentum of a government position or initiative, pull on it, and use the participation of ordinary people to transform the moment into something much bigger. Done right, this can ensure the government’s initial bid and establish the floor, not the ceiling, for progressive reform.

The best news from Australia

is that by responding creatively to the challenges of the new era, GetUp’s growth rate has increased since the election and the action rates have remained as high on average as during the height of the opposition. Only nine months after the election, the story is still unfolding, but the early signs offer lessons in independence and imagination that we should heed.

OF COURSE, LOOKING overseas is but one approach to addressing this challenge—just the start of a broader conversation that involves us all. Since MoveOn was founded in a humble living room far outside the Beltway, its course has been set by the members themselves. And so it must be; the choice of members to participate is the only real source of influence we’ve ever wielded.

Ultimately, this means the challenge of figuring out how to pull America forward in the new era does not belong to MoveOn or to another progressive group any more than it rests solely in the hands of Barack Obama. It belongs to all of us, and the movement we’ve built and the actions we take will rise or fall with the choices we make in the crucial months to come. As far as I’m concerned, that’s a pretty good reason to hope. **TAP**

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under the surface. “The 50-State Strategy is certainly not the unanimous strategy,” he says. “If Obama were to lose, those folks would come out of the woodwork.”

On the other hand, some grass-roots activists worry Obama isn’t committed *enough* to the 50-State Strategy. Aside from sharing information from the newly centralized DNC voter list, the campaign has no uniform way of coordinating with state Democratic parties. In Iowa, the Obama team took over the state party’s door-to-door operation, leading to worries that state-legislature candidates would be given short shrift by the White House–focused national campaign. In Colorado, Obama’s staff is doing its own fieldwork, despite the existence of a state party–coordinated campaign in support of the entire Democratic ticket,

“The issue,” says Joe Trippi, “is not what happens if Obama loses or if he wins, but if he gets there and leaves out his grass roots.”

somewhat of a duplication of resources. And in Ohio, Obama canvassers are joining the already-existing, locally coordinated ground campaign, going door to door to identify undecided voters for both congressional races and the presidential.

There is even some eye-raising at Obama’s ties to the congressional Old Guard. After all, the candidate promising to change the culture of Washington hasn’t surrounded himself with 20-somethings forged in the crucible of the Netroots, but rather with veterans of the party’s impotent era. Independence from Congress can be just as important as the ability to work within its internecine power structures, says Rep. George Miller, a 33-year House veteran who serves as chairman of the crucial Education and Labor Committee. “There are a lot of people in this Congress who are heavily invested in the status quo,” Miller says. “Obama has got to guide Congress to get the results that he wants. It’s a tough relationship.”

What Obama wants is, in some ways, the key question. If Bill Clinton’s project for the Democratic Party was mostly ideological, Obama’s is mostly organizational. Clinton sought to change the party’s ideas; Obama is more interested in building its infrastructure. But for what? Obama’s health-care plan was the least ambitious of the three major candidates, and his recent gestures toward the center on government wiretapping, choice, and gun control have some of his supporters concerned. At times, Obama can seem so focused on building that it’s unclear if he’s really thought through the blueprints.

Obama’s supporters have invested so much in their candidate that betrayal, or even insufficient fulfillment, could be devastating. It’s bad enough to be disappointed by a candidate you don’t believe in. Being let down by the one who inspires you is a much more demoralizing experience. “The issue,” says Joe Trippi, who ran both Dean’s and John Edwards’ presidential campaigns, “is not what happens if Obama loses or if he wins and continues to build, but if he gets there and leaves out his grass roots.”

WINNING ELECTIONS, counting votes. There’s little new about that. Obama’s theory of change is simultaneously less inspiring and far more pragmatic than he’s given credit for. It relies less on a new vision of politics than on an uncommon mastery of old procedures, institutions, and organizing tactics.

“We’re building lasting infrastructure which will not only help us win in November but build the progressive movement for years to come,” Obama says. “Our 50-State Strategy isn’t just about winning the presidential election but lifting Democrats up and down the ticket. We have a historic opportunity to elect more Democrats at every level, from city councils to state legislatures to the United States Congress, and *that’s* how we’re going to bring about a working Democratic majority, and *that’s* how

we’re going to see real change in America.” It is a vision of political power that requires more than a strong president: It requires a strong party. The strategy is not necessarily in opposition to Obama’s top-level

message of bringing the country together and healing partisan divisions, but it mostly seeks to do so through the machinery of the Democratic Party, by building party organizations in counties where voters haven’t had a respectful conversation with a Democrat in decades, and electing the sort of governing majorities that can end the legislative gridlock that so enrages the polity. The theory is that Democratic successes—or at least Obama successes—will ease divisions because voters will be glad to see something finally getting done.

A focus on legislative achievement as an answer to polarization was always, to some degree, implicit in Obama’s rhetoric. He described divisiveness as the result of ineffectual politics and unity as the reward for effective policy-making. “I think the American people are hungry for something different and can be mobilized around big changes, not incremental changes, not small changes,” said Obama last January. “I think that there are a whole host of Republicans, and certainly independents, who have lost trust in their government, who don’t believe anybody is listening to them, who are staggering under rising costs of health care, college education, [who] don’t believe what politicians say. And we can draw those independents and some Republicans into a working coalition, a working majority for change.”

At the time, observers focused on Obama’s promised outreach to independents and Republicans. His rhetoric has often signaled an appetite for compromise that has left some wondering about what, exactly, Obama’s core policy commitments would be in office. But less attention was given to what Obama seemed to think would attract folks from across the aisle: real policy-making, which Obama’s campaign believes requires a Democratic Party infrastructure strong enough to pass the president’s priorities. In other words, strong parties aren’t the problem; they’re the solution. And now that he has

one of his own, Obama is determined to prove it. **TAP**

Dylan Matthews provided research for this article.

 **MORE ONLINE** Rep. Artur Davis discusses Obama’s party-building strategy with Ezra Klein.
www.prospect.org/onlineextras

A Liberal Shock Doctrine

History teaches us that presidents have to move quickly to enact progressive reforms before the window of opportunity closes forever. It's a lesson Barack Obama should take to heart.

BY RICK PERLSTEIN

Progressive political change in American history is rarely incremental. With important exceptions, most of the reforms that have advanced our nation's status as a modern, liberalizing social democracy were pushed through during narrow windows of progressive opportunity—which subsequently slammed shut with the work not yet complete. The post-Civil War reconstruction of the apartheid South, the Progressive Era remaking of the institutions of democratic deliberation, the New Deal, the Great Society: They were all blunt shocks. Then, before reformers knew what had happened, the seemingly sturdy reform mandate faded and Washington returned to its habits of stasis and reaction.

The Oval Office's most effective inhabitants have always understood this. Franklin D. Roosevelt hurled down executive orders and legislative proposals like thunderbolts during his First Hundred Days, hardly slowing down for another four years before his window slammed shut; Lyndon Johnson, aided by John F. Kennedy's martyrdom and the landslide of 1964, legislated at such a breakneck pace his aides were in awe. Both presidents understood that there are too many choke points—our minority-enabling constitutional system, our national tendency toward individualism, and our concentration of vested interests—to make change possible any other way.

That is a fact. A fact too many Democrats have trained themselves to ignore. And it sometimes feels like Barack Obama, whose first instinct when faced with ideological resistance seems to be to extend the right hand of fellowship, understands it least of all. Does he grasp that unless all the monuments of lasting, structural change in the American state—banking regulation, public-power generation, Social Security, the minimum wage, the right to join a union, federal funding of education, Medicare, desegregation, Southern voting rights—had happened fast, they wouldn't have happened at all?

I hope so. Because if Barack Obama is elected president with a significant popular mandate, a number of Democrats riding his coattails to the House, and enough senators to scuttle the filibuster of his legislative agenda—all of which seem entirely possible—he will inherit a historical opportunity to

civilize the United States in ways not seen in a generation. To achieve the change he seeks—the monumental trio of universal health care, a sustainable energy policy, and a sane and secure internationalism—he has to completely reverse the way Democrats have habituated themselves to doing business. If they want true progress, they have to be juggernauts. American precedent gives them no other way.

LET FRANKLIN ROOSEVELT be our guide. We take for granted now one of his signature political innovations: the idea of an executive “legislative agenda,” a specific set of White House proposals, by which the success or failure of a presidency can be judged. FDR's was the first and most spectacular. He understood that the New Deal would pass quickly or it would not pass at all. And so, politically, he yoked Congress' willingness to pass his program without obstruction to Congress' willingness to address the national emergency *tout court*.

We're not facing a Great Depression-level emergency now. But with an unprecedented 77 percent of respondents in an Associated Press poll saying they believe the nation is on the “wrong track,” and 9 percent telling the Gallup organization they approve of Congress' job performance, Obama is not without leverage. Ideally, Obama's Washington would resemble FDR's in 1935. “The stories of that period always seemed to follow the same pattern,” Thomas Frank writes in his new book, *The Wrecking Crew: How Conservatives Rule*, “how the bright young man arrived in the city, fresh from law school, where he was put to work immediately on business of utmost urgency; how he went for days without sleep.”

One of those exhausted bright young men, of course, was bright-eyed Lyndon B. Johnson of the Texas Hill Country. The 1930s Washington culture in which LBJ thrived was not merely a function of the New Dealers' scramble to redeem a national emergency. It was a function of the fact that they understood the reality of America as “the frozen republic,” as Daniel Lazare has called it. By the time Johnson got his accidental opportunity to occupy his hero FDR's chair, progressives understood implicitly that the unique constitutional system, conceived to protect the minority interests of slaveholders, gives the upper hand to

obstructers. This, and not the supposed necessity of trimming ideological sails to placate some notional conservative majority, guided their strategizing. James MacGregor Burns' book on the subject, *The Deadlock of Democracy*, was not merely what every progressive in Washington was reading during the Kennedy years, it was what every progressive was living. The House Rules Committee, dominated by reactionary Southerners, kept Kennedy from passing even an increase in the minimum wage, let alone his campaign promise—the cornerstone of *his* legislative agenda—to extend Social Security to cover medical care for the elderly. It was, as historians G. Calvin Mackenzie and Robert Weisbrot write in their fine recent study, *The Liberal Hour: Washington and the Politics of Change in the 1960s*, “a lesson fully understood by the Southerners in Congress. They didn’t need to have majorities on their side, they didn’t need to have public opinion on their side, they didn’t need the president on their side. They only needed to have the rules on their side.”

a month, convincing 38 legislators to return to Washington during their Christmas vacations to approve the loan. The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964—the “war on poverty”—passed by a nearly two-to-one margin. Johnson advocated for a tax cut that conservatives called a budget-buster, bringing Dwight D. Eisenhower out of retirement to campaign against it. But Johnson passed that, too. Then came Medicare. Then the Civil Rights Act. “I’m not going to cavil, and I’m not going to compromise,” Johnson told Sen. Richard Russell of Georgia as the landmark bill Kennedy introduced to no avail in the summer of 1963 was steamrolling its way to completion.

In 1965 Johnson passed new legislation for preschool for poor children, college prep for poor teenagers, legal services for indigent defendants, redevelopment funds for lagging economic regions, landmark immigration reform, a new Department of Housing and Urban Development, and national endowments for the humanities and art. He even added a whole new category



Three accidents of history followed in quick succession to break the deadlock. First, in the most important turning point in history you’ve never heard of, Kennedy narrowly won a vote to dynamite the House Rules Committee’s role as a tar pit for liberal legislation by expanding its membership. Second, the Supreme Court’s first “one man, one vote” decision, *Baker v. Carr* (1962), outlawed Southern electoral systems, which, for instance, gave the three smallest counties in Georgia, with a total population of 69,800, as much voting strength as the largest county in the state, with a population of 556,326. And finally, Kennedy was shot. The national trauma was a blunt political opportunity from whose import Johnson did not flinch. “Let us continue,” he intoned in his first address to a joint session of Congress. Then, before this tragic but miraculous once-in-a-lifetime store of political capital drained away, he started passing the liberal legislative agenda that had been little more than a shadow during Kennedy’s lifetime.

Less than a month into his presidency, Johnson wrangled from a recalcitrant Congress a loan guarantee to help our mortal enemies, the Soviets, buy grain before he had been in office

to the liberal agenda with the passage of the Highway Beautification Act, the Water Quality Act, and the Clean Air Act. He insisted to his congressional leadership that the House’s bill for federal aid to education pass the Senate “literally without a comma changed,” aide Eric Goldman recalled. It did indeed, two weeks later, with only 18 votes in opposition.

His insistence on ramming through bills “without a comma changed” wasn’t a function of Johnson’s natural aggressiveness or ego (or at least not only that). It was, in the American legislative context, a necessary sort of pragmatism. The 36th president saw that his opportunity to move the country forward could end any day and that he must act before America lurched back into a state of fearful reaction. He was right. During the span of just a few weeks in the summer of 1965, Johnson flew to Independence, Missouri, to sign Medicare—the reform JFK had run on in 1960—and to Washington to sign the Voting Rights Act. Five days later, on Aug. 11, the Watts Riots brought down the curtain on the liberal hour. After that, he couldn’t even get Congress to approve \$60 million for rodent control in the slums.

The right and Democratic centrists have taught us to think of the Great Society in terms of its failures, like the War on Poverty's Community Action Program, which drove a wedge between Washington and local Democratic municipal administrations and supposedly empowered all manner of swindlers and "poverty pimps." We should focus instead on Johnson's remarkable number of broad-based accomplishments in those first 22 months. We now take for granted the notion that the elderly have a right to medical care, that the government should provide aid for education, that immigration policy should not discriminate on the basis of race, and that the government should concern itself with clean air. It would be unimaginable to see them reversed—in part because of the constitutional inertia that made them so difficult to achieve in the first place. They are the kind of things Republicans now

that really set the precedent for failed reform. It is easy to forget how progressive hopes were soaring on January 20, 1977. A Republican president had resigned in disgrace. His replacement had proven hapless and tainted. A slew of young liberal lions had been swept into office in 1974 on the wave of disgust, and Jimmy Carter was elected to give America "a government as good as its people." Even the pundits' affection was in his pocket.

In retrospect, of course, we remember how badly Carter mishandled the job of pushing his own legislative agenda. He couldn't work with Congress. He alienated key Democratic

"I'm not going to cavil, and I'm not going to compromise," Lyndon Johnson said of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.



LBJ prepares to sign the Civil Rights Act, 1964

pretend they were in favor of all along. This is the way social change works. It is the responsibility of the next progressive president to crash through a similar set of reforms for the *next* generation to take for granted.

CONSERVATIVES UNDERSTAND these stakes, which is why obstructionism is the rock upon which they have built their political church. Not for nothing was Jesse Helms celebrated so unequivocally by conservatives upon his death this summer: He was "Senator No." They know that a single well-placed roadblock, whether within the news cycle or behind closed doors in the legislative process, can stop progress *cold*—even in the face of a Democratic Congress united with a Democratic president and a friendly judiciary. They understand that in America, Democratic (and democratic) mandates are tailor-made for sabotage and that the sabotage must come early, quick, and hard.

This was the reliable formula that brought down such progressive initiatives as Clinton's health-care program. But it was Jimmy Carter's attempt to fix American energy policy

constituencies. Maybe such deficiencies won't hobble Barack Obama, who appears an infinitely more skilled politician. But despite his skill, Obama will not be available to avoid the fact that the right also learned from the early years of FDR and LBJ. They know the lessons in their bones: Strike hard and fast by any means necessary to degrade a popular new Democratic president's capability to pass anything big right away, because once something is passed, it might never go away.

Carter started out with a bang, just as FDR and LBJ would have counseled. He immediately proposed, as Sean Wilentz records in his new book, *The Age of Reagan*, "an enormously ambitious legislative agenda on matters ranging from national energy policy to streamlining the federal government." He "demanded and received emergency authorization to deregulate natural gas prices," then handed down unconditional amnesty for draft evaders and "weathered the storm and enhanced his reputation for decisiveness and independence"—shades of the bold strokes of Roosevelt's First Hundred Days. Through April, his approval rating was 75 percent. "For the moment," Wilentz concludes, "it looked as if the country had

found the leader it had been searching for since Richard Nixon's downfall." And it also looked as if that something big might happen before circumstances slammed shut the window of opportunity. The energy program, an effort Carter announced as "the moral equivalent of war," passed the House comfortably in April. But by the end of the year, the Senate eliminated it with extreme prejudice. Partly, again, it was Carter's poor political skill. It also had plenty to do with the fact that Republicans managed to destroy Carter's public goodwill in his first year as president.

A literary assassin played an outsize role in this project. Former Nixon operative William Safire was ensconced on *The New York Times* op-ed page. Sloppy record-keeping and the sort of petty favoritism endemic to provincial banking had brought Carter's close friend and budget director Bert Lance, a former banker in Georgia, before a Senate subcommittee for minor questioning. Safire raised a series of where-there's-smoke-there-must-be-fire insinuations. He hinted that the Teamsters Central States Pension Fund (which "the Labor Department says corruptly bankrolls Las Vegas mobsters," Safire helpfully reminded readers) played a role, along with, of course, the Chicago Democratic Machine—and Arabs!

Safire penned eight Lance columns over the next four months, sometimes twice a week. He repeated the original charges, dropping ones others debunked, ever implying that the charges he still mentioned were the only ones he had made all along, counting on the public's short memory to cover the fact that his original case was falling apart. Most often, his columns baited reporters: Why were they "refusing" to investigate Lance like they had hounded past Republicans?

Reforms such as Social Security, Medicare, and desegregation happened fast. Otherwise they wouldn't have happened at all.

More cunningly, Safire larded the columns with less-than-subliminal linguistic references to Watergate. "Lancegate," he implied, was *exactly the same*. He even declared a memo by the Manufacturers of Hanover Trust was "the 'smoking gun.'" (Readers were counted on to vaguely recall that the "smoking gun" tape that had brought down Nixon two years earlier *also* involved the derailing of an FBI investigation.)

It worked, at least where it counted: in the court of political cartoons. *Washington Post* editorial cartoonist Herblock gave Carter a "Checkers Award," after the infamous cocker spaniel Richard Nixon used to save his hide in a famous 1952 speech. Syndicated cartoonist Pat Oliphant went with a more straightforward depiction of Carter as Nixon: "Stonewall it. ... They're out to get us." Lance resigned; the Justice Department handed down indictments. Even though Lance was eventually completely exonerated, the damage was done. Carter, like Obama, had run as a "different kind of Democrat"—pure, unsullied. So saboteurs like Safire had a clear challenge: "prove" that Carter was just another impure politician, if even on the shakiest of pretexts.

That, of course, is what the right will try on the next Democratic president. They will take the possibility that Obama might break through the icy seas of conservative stasis and try to render it an absurdity. There is now an army of Safires and a Republican Party full of Senator No's. Recall William Kristol's famous memo enjoining congressional Republicans to refuse to deal with President Clinton's proposed health-care reforms. "The plan should not be amended," he wrote, "it should be erased." The right might not be at its strongest, but it certainly understands that the American system favors fell swoops, on offense as well as on defense. The system provides conservatives with opportunities for obstruction in profusion—no matter how low their approval ratings.

BARACK OBAMA HAS NOT RUN as a policy maximalist. By and large, his big proposals have all been in that safe spot where liberals can't quite get mad and the Beltway wise men can't quite get scared. He has advocated for not-quite-universal health care rather than single-payer, and promised tax cuts, not massive new social outlays. But this shouldn't worry progressives. There may be no better way to achieve an operational liberalism than to appeal to America's rhetorical conservatism. That, after all, was how the balanced-budget-promising Franklin Roosevelt ran in 1932 and how the let-us-continue Lyndon Johnson was elected in 1964.

But when it comes time to govern, an ingrained habit of incrementalism may be a very profound problem indeed. Stopped in our tracks time and time again in attempts to assure Americans the basic social rights taken for granted by citizens of every other industrialized nation, progressives have

made virtue of necessity—we have learned to think of strategic incrementalism as a positive good, even an end in itself. If, on the morning of January 20, 2009, Barack Obama should wake up to

find himself president, with 60 senators and 250 representatives, plus 60 percent of the public firmly in favor of passing universal health care, would his instincts direct him to ram the legislation through as quickly as possible? No one can say for sure. This attitude is so dormant in progressive thinking that it's hard to know whether we can revive it.

Weisbrot and Mackenzie's *The Liberal Hour* is a very aptly named book: a splendid evocation of just how evanescent American moments of reform truly are. They are not unlike an action movie starring Bruce Willis, who has 60 minutes left to defuse a time bomb before everything blows up. Take immediate action, and you might just get reforms that had seemed impossible the day before but are impossible to imagine America without just one and two generations later. Take it slow, however, and you might not get anything at all. **TAP**

Rick Perlstein is the author of Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America, and is a senior fellow at the Campaign for America's Future.

How the West Will Be Won

By espousing a brand of liberalism that's heavy on personal freedom and light on divisive social issues, Democrats are finally being heard in the Mountain West.

BY ELI SANDERS

It's morning on the Fourth of July in conservative Greeley, Colorado, and along 10th Avenue, the town's residents are staking out choice spots from which to watch the parade. A man in a "Got Freedom?" T-shirt claims a piece of sidewalk. A family with young kids dressed in patriotic hues sits along a curb. An elderly woman sets up under a shade tree with her oxygen tank at her side and a tiny American flag stuck to its valve.

A few blocks away, in the backyard of a small brick house, the Weld County Democratic Party ("Real People, Real Issues") is holding its annual Fourth of July breakfast. By the standards of this year's more notable political gatherings, it's what you might call an intimate affair. This is Weld County, after all, an agricultural area about an hour's drive north of Denver that belongs to Colorado's 4th Congressional District. That's the district in which Republican Marilyn Musgrave has won three consecutive terms in Congress by decrying same-sex marriage and gun-control laws and pushing for a "National Year of the Bible." In other words, this is not normally a place where one expects to see signs of a Democratic resurgence.

Then again, these are not normal political times. A few years ago, only about 30 people attended this gathering. This year, close to 100 showed up. It could be nothing, this increased turnout at one Democratic breakfast in a tiny conservative town, or it could be yet another sign that Democratic fortunes are improving in areas of the Western United States that the party used to write off.

It's not just the tea leaves in Greeley that suggest something is happening for Democrats out West. In almost all of the states touched by the Rocky Mountain chain, a tide of Republican dominance that began in the Reagan era seems to be rapidly ebbing. These "Mountain West" states—Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico—used to appear indelibly red, and not just on presidential election nights. With few exceptions, the governors of these states were Republican, their congressional delegations were Republican-dominated, and their state legislatures were Republican-controlled. Now, as governorships, congressional seats, and state houses across the region have steadily flipped into Democratic hands over the last

decade, several of these states have turned purple, and a number seem on the verge of becoming blue. To take just one leading indicator: In 2000, not a single governor in the Mountain West was a Democrat. Today, the majority of the governors in the region are Democrats, including the governor in Dick Cheney's home state of Wyoming.

This dramatic turnabout is rooted in a complicated mix of demographic changes, new economic realities, improved Democratic candidates, and a general disenchantment with the direction of the country. But it is reverberating up the political ladder and resulting in some unusual political moments this year, such as when Barack Obama decided to spend his Fourth of July in Montana, a state with only three electoral votes, and arrived there to news of a poll that showed him with a surprising five-point lead in the state.

This year's Democratic National Convention was placed in Denver precisely because of the sense of opportunity in the region. With memories of a record-shattering pro-Obama turnout in Colorado's Democratic caucuses fresh in their minds, some political analysts are predicting Obama will win the state in November, an outcome that—along with other potential Obama wins in Nevada, New Mexico, and Arizona—could completely alter the electoral map.

"There's one word that explains most of it," said John Straayer, a professor of political science at Colorado State University. "And that's 'Republicans.'" Voters in the Mountain West still have a conservative bent, but, Straayer and others told me, they've become tired of the wedge issues, the cultural crusading, and, most of all, the war. They're independent thinkers by nature, and they want answers from pragmatists, not pabulum from ideologues. "James Dobson and Grover Norquist don't get your highways paved," Straayer told me. "They don't get your universities funded. They just tear it apart and elevate other issues."

Pat Williams, the nine-term Democratic congressman from Montana who now watches trends in the region as a senior fellow at the Center for the Rocky Mountain West, said that Republicans used to count on the high peaks of the Rockies as a kind of magic barrier—not just the marker of the Continental Divide but also a kind of cultural and political divide that would keep

liberal successes contained to the Pacific Coast. “For Republicans, the Rockies are like a levy,” Williams said. “The levy on the left bank. It’s been leaking. Republicans have been doing a lot of sandbagging out here, but it’s starting to break, and if it does, it’s going to flood Republicans out for a long time.”

I WAS IN GREELEY on the Fourth of July to watch Congressman Mark Udall, a Colorado Democrat, as he stumped for votes in his race for the Senate seat that’s being vacated by retiring Republican Wayne Allard. I wasn’t alone. *The New York Times* had a reporter there and so did the Bloomberg news service. A few years ago it would have seemed like a waste of time for any out-of-state political writer to be following a Democratic Senate hopeful to a place like Greeley, and certainly a waste of time for the candidate himself to be there.

Yet there was Mark Udall, tall, sure of step, fit and handsome in his cowboy casual and with his steely gray hair, standing on the back porch of the home that was hosting the Democratic breakfast, talking up his campaign. He ticked off the issues he believes voters care about these days: Renewable energy. Universal health care. An honorable exit from Iraq. Taking care of veterans.

The picnic-goers in Greeley gave hearty applause only to the line about veterans. These are the kind of people that the Democratic Party has been working hard to better relate to in the Mountain West—voters supportive of green energy in theory but worried that it somehow means higher gas prices, voters who favor better health care in the abstract but are wary of big government initiatives, voters who are fed up with the Iraq War but are susceptible to the argument that withdrawal means surrender. By fielding candidates that look the part and speak with the direct and sometimes gritty tones of a rugged region, Democrats have found that they can now be heard long enough to, for example, disabuse a group of voters of the notion that any investment in cleaner energy is going to make it even more expensive to fill up their pickups.

I watched Jon Tester do this in 2006 in Montana during his run for Senate. Here was a third-generation farmer in a Carhartt jacket, his left hand missing three fingers from an accident with a meat grinder. Montanans, it turned out, were eager to listen as he made the connection between Republican fiscal priorities and the fact that it was increasingly difficult for working families to find time to “go out fishin’.” Tester won that race, sending the corrupt Republican incumbent Conrad Burns into retirement and helping to give Democrats their current one-vote margin in the Senate.

One doesn’t necessarily have to be a farmer familiar with meat grinders to win in Colorado, Nevada, and New Mexico, the three most coveted swing states in the region. But a love of the region’s spectacular lands, and a pragmatism about utilizing their vast natural resources are prerequisites. So is a respect for people’s desire not to be interfered with too much and a tolerance for the fast-growing diversity that is reshaping many of these states.

A fundamental dynamic of the region is that the farther south one goes, the less white the states become. Montana is almost 90 percent white. Colorado is 70 percent white, with Hispanics making up by far the largest minority group. And by the time one reaches New Mexico—which, with its huge Hispanic population and large Indian tribes, has been majority-minority for decades—one is solidly out of the areas of the Mountain West where the nativist language of, say, a Tom Tancredo, has any large-scale political utility. In fact, it seems appropriate that Tancredo announced last year that he will be retiring when his current term expires, as it’s becoming clear that both dispositionally and demographically, the future of the Mountain West is not with people such as himself.

IN GREELEY, IN THE BACK of a campaign van shuttling us from the Democratic breakfast to the Fourth of July parade and the cattle drive that was about to kick it off, Mark Udall explained his core message to Coloradans: “Pragmatic environmentalism, a new energy economy, libertarian social policies, and tax

The Rockies are like a leaking levy. Republicans have been doing a lot of sandbagging, but it’s starting to break.

policies that are right-sized and explainable, where the voters can see a return on their investments.” What he doesn’t talk about? Divisive social issues.

“The citizens in the West,” he told me, “have said, ‘Here are our priorities: We’re libertarians with a small L. We’re ‘live and let live’ on the social issues. There are bigger challenges and more important opportunities in front of us than telling people what their personal behavior should or shouldn’t be. That includes things like firearm ownership. ... Where you worship is nobody’s business. Who you have a long-term relationship with is nobody’s business. The choices you make about your family’s reproductive future are nobody’s business.”

It’s a message not likely to be welcomed at the Focus on the Family headquarters in Colorado Springs, but one smartly calibrated to appeal to prickly rural Democrats and also, and perhaps more important, to the huge mass of independents (or “unaffiliateds” as they’re called in Colorado) who now make up a bloc significantly larger than registered Democrats in the state. The Colorado case is an extreme example of a phenomenon found all over the region: In several Mountain West states, independents and independent-minded Republicans make up a group that Democrats must reach in order to win.

Naturally, Colorado Republicans want to cast Mark Udall as a scary liberal out of touch with the state’s values. His opponents refer to him derisively as “the congressman from Boulder” (which, in Colorado-speak, is similar to saying he’s on the faculty at Berkeley). They say his ideas about the environment will mean higher gas prices. And they point out that Mark Udall is the descendent of a storied liberal political dynasty that goes back more than 100 years in the Western United States. After all,



Go West: Rep. Mark Udall campaigns in Greeley, Colorado, on July 4, 2008, for an open Senate seat.

the Western ethos of rugged individualism doesn't exactly mesh with the idea of dynasties and their attendant entitlements.

Which is probably why Mark Udall told me that he doesn't like the word "dynasty" much. But whether or not he acknowledges it, his famous relatives are important to his political history. Mark Udall's father, Morris Udall, represented Arizona in the House for 30 years and helped to double the size of the national parks system. His uncle, Stewart Udall, served as secretary of the interior under Kennedy and Johnson and is credited with passage of landmark environmental legislation such as the Clean Air Act. And his cousin, Tom Udall, Stewart Udall's son, is a congressman from New Mexico who is currently running for the Senate seat being given up by Republican Pete Domenici.

There's a certain synchronicity to the fact that both of the younger Udalls, Mark and Tom, are now running for Senate. They were both elected to Congress in the same year, 1998, and then, as now, their success or failure was seen as an important barometer. Back then it was a question of whether the region that once sent an earlier generation of Udalls to Washington had become far too Republican to ever do so again. In a dispatch from the campaign trail in 1998, James Brooke of *The New York Times* writes: "Elected Democrats have become in the West similar to the endangered species that the Udalls once championed in Washington." The victories of Mark and Tom Udall in 1998 showed that significant Democratic wins were, in fact, possible in the Republican-dominated Mountain West.

This year, if both of the Udall cousins win their Senate races, as polls in New Mexico and Colorado suggest could happen, it will again be seen as a sign—this time as a strong indication that

the region's politics have so fundamentally shifted since 1998 that an era of Republican dominance is now in the past tense.

TOM UDALL IS STANDING at a rural gas station in New Mexico. He's tall like his cousin Mark but with a rounder face and a lot more brown than gray atop his head. Sagebrush and sun-baked earth recede into the distance behind him, and he's walking toward the camera with a gait that suggests he might have just ridden up to the pumps on a horse. As he walks, he explains to the viewers at home what he intends to do about high gas prices.

Here's what you don't hear Tom Udall say in this campaign commercial: "more drilling." His opponent, the oilman and former congressman, Steve Pearce, is more than happy to utter such words, but Tom Udall plays a different set of cards. "First, stop

hedge-fund speculators from driving up the price of oil," he says. "Get oil companies to build new clean refineries in the U.S. to increase supply, or take away their tax breaks. And get serious about alternative energy." He sounds tough-minded and sure of himself, and he sounds angry about the price of gas, but he's channeling that anger toward faceless businessmen manipulating the energy market (read: Republicans).

That an aspiring Mountain West senator is addressing the energy issue in this way is notable and indicative of the changing issue matrix in the region. It's a complicated shift, but to broadly summarize: As economic and environmental issues have come to the fore in recent years, social issues have receded in importance in voters' minds. At the same time, as the Iraq War and other unpopular strategies backed by Republicans have sapped confidence in the Republican Party's ability to lead, more people have become interested in hearing Democratic solutions.

"Republicans have believed ever since Reagan that Westerners care more about corporate extractive jobs than they do about landscape and clean places to hunt, fish, and camp," Williams of the Center for the Rocky Mountain West told me. "That's a mistake." Or, at least, it has become a mistake for Republicans over time.

Swing states in the Mountain West have had some of the fastest-growing populations in the nation over the past decade, and these populations have grown, in large part, due to an influx of young college graduates, urban professionals, and well-educated retirees who move to places like Boulder and Missoula and Taos seeking a better quality of life. Unsurprisingly, these new arrivals do not tend to have a huge soft spot for the old



Don't Call It A Dynasty: Tom Udall, left, and Mark Udall on Capitol Hill with a portrait of Morris Udall, father of Mark and a former Arizona congressman.

extractive industries like oil and natural gas. They relocated to enjoy the area's natural beauty, and presented with a choice between the environment and the economic imperative to drill, they choose the former. There's also a growing recognition in the Mountain West that it's a wise investment to protect the natural beauty that so many tourists pay to experience. On top of all this, Democrats have simply become much more savvy about finding ways to draw independents and conservatives to their side in defense of the land.

That process is key to the changing political fortunes in the region, and it almost always has to begin with disarming the gun issue. Successful Democrats in the Mountain West tend to be vociferous defenders of the Second Amendment—and often hunters or gun owners themselves. In Colorado, on the day after the Fourth of July, I followed Mark Udall to an event he was holding in a shotgun-shell-covered clearing in the Pike-San Isabel National Forest, located in the foothills of the Rockies just 40 miles southwest of Denver. The event was intended to promote a new initiative he has launched to fund and improve shooting ranges on public lands.

Mark Udall may have arrived in a black Prius, but he is far from the caricature of the Prius-driving lefty, desperate to bend your ear about the plight of polar bears and the need for trigger locks. Instead, Udall bent my ear about his mother's sharpshooter and marksman certificates from the National Rifle Association, his own experience hunting doves and quail, and his proposal to let hunters help cull the overgrown elk herd in Rocky Mountain National Park (an idea that has raised the ire of many environmentalists). His spokeswoman, Tara Trujillo, who sometimes spends her weekends with a 20-gauge shotgun and a bunch of fellow trap and skeet shooters, stood nearby listening carefully. After the event was over, Udall's deputy political director, Gaspar Perricone, stayed behind to shoot with the sportsmen who had come to hear the Senate candidate speak. As I drove away, I saw him knock a clay pigeon

out of the air with one quick shot from his 12-gauge Browning.

Steve Cobble, once an aide to former Gov. Tony Anaya of New Mexico and a longtime observer of the region's politics, describes events like these as part of a process of helping conservative-leaning outdoorsmen "realize who their real enemies are."

Mark Udall would never put it quite in those terms. But, he told me, "we've heard for years and years from the Republican Party that Democrats are going to take away your guns. Well, in the West, everybody still owns firearms, but what's been happening is the places where you hunt and fish are being taken away, whether it's through the privatization of public lands, or widespread oil and gas drilling, or other uses that take precedence. ... I mean, it's pretty tough to go hunting in the Pinedale Anticline in Wyoming now where you have thousands of gas wells. ... The Democrats are saying, 'Wait, there's a balance here. Yeah, we need fossil fuels, but let's go slow, let's protect the activities which are historically how we identify ourselves.'"

The simple idea expressed in his last sentence, that Democrats represent an authentic *us* that is tied to the region's natural heritage and sense of itself, and that Republicans represent a corporate *them* more interested in money than in preserving the West as Westerners enjoy it, is perhaps the most powerful play the Democratic Party is now making in the region.

IT'S CLEARLY WORKING. The big question is how well it will have worked by Nov. 4.

Barack Obama, whose calm pragmatism is a perfect dispositional match for the region but whose "otherness" and urbaneness could pose a significant challenge, will have to invest heavily in the Mountain West if he's to take enough states to really alter the electoral map. And Mark and Tom Udall, who both seem well positioned to make the jump to the Senate, still have months of campaigning ahead of them. Will voters still be open to the Democratic talk about the environment if gas prices keep rising all the way through to November? We may very well find out.

We may also find out next year, in the event of a double-Udall victory, what it means to have a few more gun-shooting Western pragmatists in the Senate. In thinking about this, the case of Jon Tester—who helped give Democrats control of the Senate in 2006 but can't always vote like a coastal Democrat if he wants to be re-elected—is instructive. The Udalls would face a similar challenge in the Senate, and too many party-bucking Western pragmatists could create another point of fissure in the majority.

But for now that's all hypothetical, and in any case, after the last eight years, it's a comparatively good problem for the Democrats to have.

What's certain is that the Mountain West is moving in a new direction and that this movement is favoring Democrats in a big way. "The change out here is significant and real," Williams told me.

"But," he added, with a warning note in his voice, "it's no more permanent than it was for Republicans." **TAP**

Eli Sanders is the senior staff writer for The Stranger, an alternative newsweekly in Seattle.

Obama vs. the Fiscal Fear-Mongers

The far right has been manipulating the sensible center to conjure up an extreme “entitlement crisis.” The next president needs to resist being swayed.

BY ROBERT KUTTNER

If Barack Obama is elected president, he will inherit not just the most serious financial and economic crisis since the Great Depression. He will face an obstructionist orthodoxy about government spending that will make recovery even more difficult to achieve. The nature of our economic, social, and fiscal problems and the boundaries of the politically possible have been defined by conservatives who have often skillfully co-opted moderate liberals. Nowhere is this more the case than in the received wisdom that there is an “entitlement crisis” and that the federal budget needs to be balanced.

In a deepening recession, not only would Obama need to use deficit spending as short-term stimulus; he would need to dramatically expand public outlay to remedy 30 years of increasing inequality and the neglect of public systems. To achieve transition to Gore-scale renewable energy, he would need even more public funds. The implosion of the financial system, as a result of deregulation, will deepen recession unless offset by public investment. But if Obama buys into the myth that we can’t even afford existing programs, audacity and hope will be lost before he even begins. Obama has already fallen into this trap once, accepting the mistaken premise that Social Security suffers from a mighty shortfall.

It will take great resolve to resist the supposedly high-minded—and well-funded—thinking that pervades Washington and the media. Peter G. Peterson, the onetime secretary of commerce under Richard Nixon and billionaire former partner of the Blackstone Group, has written four books over the past two decades bemoaning the cost of entitlements and forecasting disaster. Peterson recently endowed the Peter G. Peterson Foundation with a personal gift of \$1 billion (about half his windfall from the sale of Blackstone) and hired as its founding president the government’s former comptroller general, David Walker, a political independent with a facility for garnering good publicity with bad fiscal news. Walker in turn has influenced the thinking of foundation presidents and commentators.

“I would ask that if you leave here remembering only one number, let it be this one: \$53 trillion,” Peterson testified to the House Budget Committee last June. “Fifty-three trillion in today’s dollars is what this country owes between our national debt, future liabilities, and our huge unfunded promises for

programs like Social Security and Medicare,” he continued, terming that number “unacceptable” and “un-American.”

The \$53 trillion figure is intellectually dishonest. It is derived by taking the worst-case assumptions about Medicare and Social Security, adding the national debt, assuming no change in social policy (such as universal health insurance) or revenues, and extrapolating these and other projected costs into the indefinite future. As the economist Dean Baker has observed, everyone expects the Pentagon to spend hundreds of billions a year indefinitely, but we don’t call this “unfunded liability” because we expect government to collect taxes to pay for it. In his 1993 book, *Facing Up*, Peterson himself puts the unfunded liability number at a mere \$14 trillion, and other estimates run as high as \$90 trillion. Any gloom-and-doom estimate that can vary by orders of magnitude should be inherently suspect. But this is the received fiscal wisdom.

THIS CONVENTIONAL THINKING is shared by a broad cast of characters that includes the 49-member Blue Dog caucus of fiscally conservative Democrats in the House. Among other things, the Blue Dogs blocked a more expansive stimulus package in February.

To appreciate just how disabling is the bipartisan echo chamber on the alleged entitlement crisis, consider the debate on budget restraint that raged in the spring and summer of 2008 between two rival groups of influential budget experts. The story begins with the radically conservative Heritage Foundation and one of its most effective strategists, Stuart Butler, an affable Briton with Thatcherite dreams of privatizing both Social Security and Medicare.

In 2006, Butler, with the aid of Maya MacGuineas of the Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, collaborated with Isabel Sawhill of Brookings on a big idea: What if conservatives and liberals (with liberals implausibly represented by Brookings) could unite on a bipartisan plan to solve the catastrophe of long-term deficits in entitlement programs? The idea had both political and funding appeal. Middle-of-the-road foundations love nothing so much as bipartisanship, which reassures their trustees.

Brookings and Heritage convened a regular working group, named the Brookings-Heritage Fiscal Seminar, whose 16 mem-

bers spanned a spectrum running from senior economists at the Urban Institute in the political center, to Heritage on the far right. No liberals were invited, not even those known for concern about deficits, like Robert Greenstein of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities or Brookings' own Henry Aaron or Jason Furman (now a senior policy aide to Obama).

Meanwhile, several politically moderate foundation presidents bought the essentially conservative story about the menace of long-term entitlements—with an improbable liberal twist. Supposedly, Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid were crowding out other outlays and undermining the possibility of needed public spending on things like housing and early childhood education. This theme was the subject of a 2006 closed meeting of foundation presidents.

One of the presenters at that session, Jonathan Fanton, president of the MacArthur Foundation, subsequently said in a June 2008 address to the Council on Foundations:

In January, I met with Comptroller General David Walker. He noted that the percentage of the U.S. population aged 65 and over will likely reach 20 percent by 2047—perhaps more, if life spans continue to increase. Spending on Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security will

pitched them on a large grant for an ongoing bipartisan seminar. Ultimately, five foundations poured several hundred thousand dollars into the project, including the Annie E. Casey, Charles Stewart Mott, and William and Flora Hewlett foundations (note: Casey and MacArthur have also supported the *Prospect*). The Brookings-Heritage seminar then set about trying to reach agreement on a set of principles. It was here that Butler and the other conservatives took the moderates to the cleaners.

If one begins from the (dubious) premise that long-term deficits are a dire problem, any serious fiscal bargain would have to include both restoration of tax revenues as well as caps on spending. In fact, Clinton's treasury secretary, Robert Rubin, has spent much of the Bush era trying to promote just such a grand bargain. But in several rounds of discussion of the Brookings-Heritage Fiscal Seminar, the right-wingers around the table made it clear that taxes could not be part of the discussion; the Bush tax cuts were sacrosanct.

Such intransigence should have been a deal-breaker. How can social programs be on the table but not taxes? But having taken large sums from several foundations and having promised a consensus document, the group could not deadlock; it needed a "deliverable." So while the right-wingers played hardball, the moderates in the group just rolled over.

It will take true leadership from the White House to explain that the hysteria about "entitlements" is right-wing ideology masquerading as fiscal high-mindedness.

more than double by 2050, from about 9 percent of GDP at present to nearly 20 percent. ... The implications for education, social services, housing programs, and more are alarming. Virtually all of MacArthur's domestic work is at risk if the federal and state governments lose their discretion to allocate needed funds to address social and economic problems.

This analysis is profoundly misleading. The savaging of spending for children and social services under Reagan and both Bushes had nothing to do with Social Security and Medicare, whose problems exist in the future (and in the case of Social Security may not exist at all). And in the Clinton era, social outlay was blocked by the administration's drive for a permanent budget surplus.

It's true that entitlement programs have gradually been consuming more of the federal budget, but the cuts in other programs were caused by the hostility of right-wing presidents to social spending generally, by reckless tax cuts for the wealthy, and by the increases in military spending. And if these foundations wanted more social spending, about the last place on the planet to look for allies was the Heritage Foundation—a group that would oppose expanded social spending no matter what the fate of Social Security and Medicare.

However, several of these foundations had invited proposals on fiscal stability, and Heritage and Brookings successfully

THE ALARMIST JOINT STATEMENT was released last March 31 under the headline, "Taking Back Our Fiscal Future." It proposed a radical remedy that had long been a goal of the Heritage Foundation and other conservatives—automatic caps on spending for Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security, unless Congress acted to rein them in first. This draconian remedy, Butler hoped, would logically lead either to privatization or to the replacement of these guaranteed programs with vouchers that would provide far less benefit.

Such an approach has been fiercely and successfully resisted by Democrats since the first Bush presidency. But here were some of the most prestigious Democratic budget experts signing on, including former senior budget officials Robert Reichauer, Alice Rivlin, and Isabel Sawhill, as well as former Clinton aide William Galston.

The group's composition and the report's conclusions show just how skillfully the right has been able to dominate public debate and manipulate or co-opt moderates. The Heritage Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute, in other contexts, peddle tax cuts as the cure for all ills. But put them in a room with the Brookings Institution and the Urban Institute and they become gravely concerned about the fiscal well-being of the Republic—as long as the remedy is to destroy social insurance.

Writing on the Heritage Foundation's Web site, Butler crowed that the authors had agreed that Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security "should be converted into regular discre-

tionary programs that compete on a level playing field with such programs as defense, rather than pre-empting funds for these programs or automatically running up long-term deficits.” He added:

The authors agree that certain myths are used as excuses for not tackling the entitlement problem. Among the biggest is that we can simply fix the problem by ‘rolling back the Bush tax cuts’ and raising taxes to pay for entitlement promises. The authors agree that raising taxes to the European-style levels needed for that would ‘cripple the economy.’

Several signers complained that they had not agreed to convert these social insurance entitlements to ordinary



spending programs—only to budget caps—and the first claim was removed from the Heritage site. Aaron and Greenstein responded by organizing a rival group, which included Nobel Laureate Robert Solow. The Aaron-Greenstein expert group released its own report in early July, declaring, “We agree that the nation faces large, persistent budget deficits that would ultimately risk significant damage to the economy.” But, the group warned that the recommendations contained in the Brookings-Heritage report could:

jeopardize the health and economic security of the poor, the elderly, and people with serious disabilities. For one thing, it does not focus adequate attention on the main driver of our fiscal problem—the relentless rise in health care costs throughout the U.S. health care system. ... For another, it does not propose any action to restrain the hundreds of billions of dollars in entitlements that are delivered through the tax code and flow largely to more affluent Americans.

The rival report went on to explain that “over the next 75 years, the cost just of making permanent the 2001 and 2003 tax cuts is 3½ times the size of the entire Social Security shortfall,” and that tax loopholes—taken off the table in the Brookings-Heritage report—consume \$900 billion a year.

As Greenstein points out, the most politically damaging thing about the Brookings/Heritage document is that it uses moderate Democrats—the senior budget experts whom a President Obama would be likely to consult—to validate the far-right storyline: that the nation’s fiscal problems have everything to do with social insurance and nothing to do with tax cuts or the failure to achieve comprehensive health reform.

Why did the likes of Reischauer, Sawhill, and Rivlin let themselves be used in this fashion? After three or more decades on the front lines of budget wars, each seems to have given up on more imaginative possibilities and become a crusader for limiting entitlements.

For Sawhill, the conflict is generational. The old, she believes, get relatively too much via Social Security and Medicare, and the corollary is that the young get too little. As she writes in a recent article for Brookings:

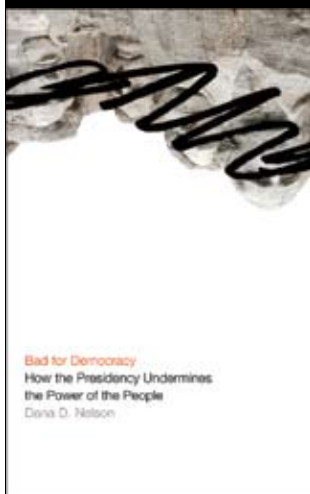
Right now, thanks to the current contract, older Americans are the only group in our society that has access to universal, fee-for-service medical care. Younger Americans do not have such access, have seen their incomes stagnate in recent years, and yet will be expected to pay for the current generation’s morally indefensible fiscal policies. As a result, without a major change, working-age families and their children will not receive the kind of help that will eventually make the nation more productive. And a country that gives priority to its elderly over its young is arguably a country that doesn’t have much of a future. A new contract, then, would tighten the flow of funds to older generations and invest more resources in younger families and their children.

But why that stingy solution? Why not expand the social contract to the young rather than withdraw it from the old? Why not pay for universal pre-kindergarten by repealing the Bush tax cuts rather than by gutting Social Security benefits? This is the kind of weary, stunted liberal imagination that Obama will have to challenge.

Reischauer, now president of the Urban Institute, told me that he felt it was necessary for a high-profile, ideologically diverse group to propose a drastic remedy. In testimony before the Senate Budget Committee last year, Reischauer downplayed the impact of tax cuts. Federal revenues, he noted, were “about at their post-war average.” He added, “Clearly, we must look elsewhere for the roots of the severe budget imbalance predicted for the future. And those roots are to be found in the retirement-related entitlement programs—Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid.”

Reischauer has even been wary of expanded health-insurance coverage, lest increased access produce additional costs. “Does the total system need to be reformed? Yes, but it’s unlikely to

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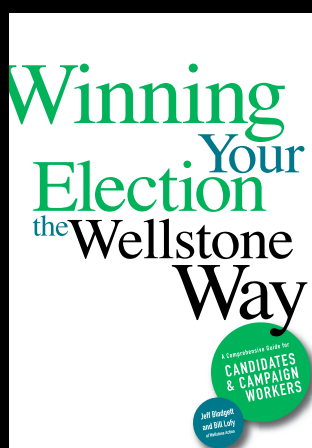
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be done in a way that will save costs. The interest groups are too powerful," he told me. Speaking of the dueling budget statements Reischauer added, "I was furious when I saw how Stuart characterized this on his Web site, and I would not be surprised if this is how he characterizes our statement in his speeches."

Then why get in bed with the likes of Stuart Butler? "Congress is going to have to grapple with this, and there are people like Stuart in Congress," Reischauer said. "We need to figure out where there is common ground." But as orchestrated by Butler, the common ground has been defined to place people with basically kindred views, like Greenstein and Reischauer, in warring camps—while those whose social philosophies are worlds apart, like Reischauer and Butler, are in the same club.

On "entitlements," the fiscal moderates have bought the idea of emphasizing cuts in spending first. On Medicare, they've accepted the right's premise that the idea that true national health insurance is politically inconceivable, even though it would produce great cost-savings by eliminating expensive middlemen. And since national health insurance is out of the question, we might as well hack away at Medicare and Medicaid.

But as the Greenstein-Aaron report points out, capping Medicare and Medicaid would not solve the general problem of inflation in health costs. It would only "threaten the central achievement of those programs—providing the elderly, the disabled, and the poor with access to the same kind of health care that other Americans receive."

SO HERE IS WHAT OBAMA FACES in terms of conventional budgetary wisdom. On the center-right, some of Washington's most prestigious Democratic budget experts are willing to put Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid on the chopping block before addressing the issue of Bush's multi-trillion dollar tax cut. On the center-left, good liberals such as Greenstein and Aaron are also alarmed about long-term deficits in entitlement programs but want tax increases to be part of the deal.

Aaron is brave enough to say we can't do Medicare reform without general health-insurance reform. Greenstein, to his great credit, says he believes that increased deficits are needed in a severe recession, and that Social Security and Medicare as entitlement programs can be saved with sensible reforms—but it is a mark of how far to the right the consensus has swung that they are on the left wing of this conversation.

It will take true leadership from the White House to explain that no, Social Security is not in crisis; that the hysteria about "entitlements" is right-wing ideology masquerading as fiscal high-mindedness; that the cure for Medicare's problems is universal health insurance; that the cupboard is in fact not bare if we revise taxing and spending priorities. A President Obama would also need to refrain from taking his budget advice from conservative onetime liberals, who are still generally considered the cream of Democratic fiscal experts. And he will need to explain to the American people why austerity is in fact not the right cure for recession. **TAP**

Adapted from Obama's Choice: America's Economic Crisis and the Power of a Transformative Presidency (Chelsea Green).

How the Dems Lost on Education

Republicans have exploited the Democratic Party's failure to own the education-reform issue—and students have paid the price.

BY KEVIN CAREY

For Connecticut's attorney general, Richard Blumenthal, filing a lawsuit against the No Child Left Behind Act must have seemed like an obvious winner. More and more attorney generals around the country were using splashy litigation to boost their profiles. (It was August 2005, and Eliot Spitzer was a lock for the governor's mansion in neighboring New York.) By taking on the increasingly unpopular Bush administration and demanding more federal funding for education, headlines and support from fellow Democrats were sure to follow. "Give us the money," Blumenthal demanded at a press conference, or relieve the state from having to test elementary school students once a year in reading and math. And for a few months after the suit was filed, it seemed to work. The National Education Association (NEA), the nation's largest teachers' union, issued a laudatory press release. "Connecticut is taking a brave stand today," said the NEA's president, Reg Weaver. So far, so good.

But things soon started to go south. In November, a federal judge threw out a similar NEA-backed suit in Michigan. Then came the real blow: On January 30, 2006, the Connecticut chapter of the NAACP announced plans to intervene in the suit, representing a group of minority schoolchildren *against* Blumenthal. Noting that Connecticut had "the worst gap in achievement between poor and non-poor children" in the nation, the NAACP called the suit "an excuse to not meet the needs of Connecticut's children of color." National civil-rights leaders soon joined the chorus. Legendary attorney William Taylor, chair of the Citizens' Commission on Civil Rights, a man who worked with Thurgood Marshall on the 1958 Little Rock Central High School brief to the Supreme Court, dismissed Blumenthal as an opponent of civil rights. One legal observer in Connecticut called the action a "special fiasco," while the *Hartford Courant* and *The Washington Post* published editorials denouncing the suit.

Blumenthal's miscalculation wasn't an isolated incident. Democrats have been stumbling on education policy for years, fracturing the progressive coalition, tainting the party brand, creating undeserved political opportunities for Republicans, and, worst of all, standing in the way of school reforms that primarily benefit low-income and minority children. Until

Democrats reclaim education reform as a progressive cause, the embarrassments are sure to continue.

AMERICAN PUBLIC EDUCATION does a much better job than many of its conservative critics claim. The idea that present-day schools represent a huge decline from previous decades is a myth; overall student achievement has improved and is improving still. At the same time, public schools are plagued by a number of major shortcomings, most rooted in the underlying structure and history of the system, which has always been unusually local in character, funding, and governance.

Local control means that poor students receive far fewer resources than their wealthy peers and that every district makes its own decisions about what students need to learn. Because schools are government-supported and free to attend, they generally have little competition or external accountability. Historically, this has led schools in environments lacking strong economic, social, and political institutions (the District of Columbia's public schools are an infamous example) to collapse into total dysfunction. Well-off students generally do okay in this system, because their schools have more resources and whatever they don't get from their teachers is made up for at home. Low-income and minority students, by contrast—the children whom Democrats should be ideologically and politically most interested in serving—tend to fare far worse. In many distressed communities, drop-out and illiteracy rates are sky-high.

There is nothing inherently conservative about observing these persistent problems or advocating the obvious solutions: more equitable school funding, common standards across schools, external accountability for results, and more school choice to spur competition and give low-income parents the same educational options enjoyed by the rich—most of whose children attend better public schools, not private schools. It was Sen. Robert F. Kennedy, after all, who called for common standards, student testing, and accountability when the landmark Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was being written in 1965. Without them, he thought, new federal dollars would be wasted.

But Kennedy was ahead of his time in seeing the need for accountability, and the school reform agenda soon collided with larger political realities. States and districts weren't particu-

larly interested in relinquishing local control. Teachers' unions, meanwhile, were rising to power. Unionization provides great benefits to teachers in the form of higher status, better pay, and well-deserved job protections. But as unions' ability to garner pay increases has slowed since the 1970s, their agenda became more focused on two key goals: job security and classroom autonomy. Unions also focused on *school* security, seeking to maintain the status quo. They weren't interested in letting other public schools compete for the same children or letting outside agencies judge school results. Classroom autonomy, meanwhile, was seen as a key element of elevating the teaching profession into the realm of respected, self-directed professionals. This, too, argued against uniform standards.

The unions' goals meshed with district and state desires to preserve local control, creating a unified establishment agenda. And post-1972 Democratic Party reforms helped make that establishment a major player within the party. While Democrats and teachers' unions were good for public education on the whole, fighting privatization and tax cuts, they had a blind spot when it came to the quality of education. The standard Democratic platform after the 1960s always came down to *more* education—more hours, more funding, more teachers—but never *better* education through accountability, choice, and reform.

Mediocrity and dysfunction in public education persisted, a fact highlighted in *A Nation at Risk*, the influential 1983 report issued by U.S. Secretary of Education Terrel Bell's National Commission on Excellence in Education. It charged that, in the absence of standards and accountability, many schools gave students uneven instruction and weak curricula that didn't prepare them for college and careers. President Reagan jumped on the findings, participating in 18 education events in the following three months and burnishing his image as a reformer in the run-up to the 1984 election. Before the report, Reagan's education agenda had consisted of trying to abolish the Department of Education and slash education funding while promoting vouchers and school prayer. But he and his advisers did a quick about-face after seeing the public's reaction to the report and took advantage of voters' justifiable dissatisfaction with the educational status quo. It was a lesson Republicans would remember.

By the late 1980s, a bipartisan consensus had formed around standards-based reform. Progressive labor leaders like American Federation of Teachers' president, Albert Shanker, increasingly recognized the need for accountability. A 1989 meeting in Charlottesville, Virginia, brought 49 governors to the table, led by Gov. Bill Clinton of Arkansas and President George H. W. Bush, to discuss setting common standards across states and schools. But the education establishment fought back against encroachment on its authority and did so again in 1994 when President Clinton helped push through a major overhaul of ESEA. It was this law—not the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)—that first required states to create standards, test students, and hold schools accountable for student learning. Clinton also supported the emerging charter school movement, which helped create new, autonomous public schools of choice that often explicitly focused on helping disadvantaged



Where Are The Dems? Jenna Bush, Education Secretary Margaret Spellings, and Laura Bush visit Washington, D.C., first-graders in 2008. The Bush administration has used the education issue to claim that it's interested in reforming public institutions, not just dismantling them.

children. For a little while, it seemed like the historic back-and-forth was breaking decisively in one direction.

But Clinton's Department of Education failed to rigorously enforce the provisions of the 1994 law—nearly a decade later, some states still hadn't gotten around to establishing standards and tests to match. The administration became distracted by other priorities and problems. And Vice President Al Gore failed to seize the education-reform mantle in the 2000 election, rarely pushing the issue in speeches or at events. That left an opening for George W. Bush, who had championed school accountability when he was governor of Texas, allowing him to plausibly claim that he was interested in reforming public institutions, not just in tearing them down. It worked: Bush cut Gore's advantage on the issue down to the low single digits. In a July 2001 *New Yorker* article on the ongoing NCLB negotiations, journalist Nicholas Lehmann goes so far as to say, "Education was the issue that made Bush President."

Recent years have seen more of the same. When NCLB was passed with large bipartisan majorities in Congress in 2001,

civil-rights groups praised the law, which for the first time required states to annually test students in math and reading; break the numbers down by race, class, language, and disability status; and intervene in failing schools. Race- and class-based achievement gaps that had previously been hidden beneath average scores finally came to light. But the NEA soon declared all-out war on the law, and the Bush administration failed to propose the maximum allowed funding. NCLB's association with the president made it anathema to the growing ranks of anti-Bush partisans, one more item on a long list of failures and betrayals. This magazine called it "Bush's Education Fraud." Flaws in the school-rating system became apparent, but Congress was unable to move legislation to fix them.

By the time the epic 2008 Democratic primary was underway, education reform was at best a muddle to be avoided, at worst an opportunity for pandering to the base. Hillary

Democrats' education-policy failures have hurt the party's public image and have created numerous political openings for Republicans.

Clinton, one of the 91 senators who voted for NCLB in 2001, ratcheted up the anti-NCLB rhetoric as the campaign wore on, eventually calling it a "failed policy that needs fundamental overhaul." Barack Obama's NCLB critiques, while significant, were more muted and focused on expanding measures of school success beyond standardized tests.

While the candidates danced around the issue on the campaign trail, some Democrats in Congress formed a strange-bedfellow alliance with extreme conservatives to shut NCLB down. In June 2008, Tim Walz, a freshman Democratic congressman and former schoolteacher, co-sponsored a bill backed by the NEA and the National School Boards Association designed to suspend the core accountability provisions of the law. The NEA sent a grateful letter to the Republican co-sponsor, Rep. Sam Graves (the Missouri conservative who recently ran an infamous, blatantly homophobic campaign advertisement attacking a Democratic candidate for her "San Francisco values"). Meanwhile, a group of major Hispanic organizations including the National Council of La Raza denounced the bill, warning it would "bring the progress schools have made under NCLB in educating Latinos to a screeching halt." It was the Blumenthal fiasco all over again, this time alienating the Latino community while once again painting Democrats as more interested in protecting the education establishment than in offering any real solutions of their own.

DEMOCRATS' LONG HISTORY of failure to fully embrace education reform has damaged the party in many ways. It has hurt the party's public image, reinforcing the sense that Democrats are captive to their constituent interest groups, including unions.

Teachers have a fundamental right to organize, and teachers' unions have many positive effects on education, supporting needed funding and the larger Democratic agenda. But the NEA's resistance to reform reinforces the notion that Democrats can't be trusted to act in the larger public interest. More importantly, Democrats' education-policy failures have been bad for low-income, minority, and immigrant children—the very children Democrats purport to represent. The standard Democratic education platform (more funding, more teachers, no real accountability, no real choice) does nothing to reform dysfunctional urban school systems or attack the deep-seated racial and economic disparities that often lurk below the surface in wealthier suburban communities. Resistance to NCLB has created some nightmarish historical ironies, as one Connecticut NAACP lawyer noted, "One can't help but remember back [to] the Dixiecrat period when certain Southern states asserted that they were not required to comply with certain federal civil-rights laws designed to protect people's rights."

These failures create numerous political openings for Republicans. Charter schools, for example, bring fresh entrepreneurial energy, innovation, and competition into the education sector. They give low-income parents new public-education options without subsidizing unaccountable parochial schools. They're open to all students via lottery, so parents choose the schools—not the other way around. While some charter schools haven't performed well, others, like the KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) network of schools, have produced results for low-income minority students that are unmatched by traditional public schools. Charter schools aren't intrinsically labor-unfriendly—the United Federation of Teachers operates a pair in New York. In other words, charter schools retain the good features of conservative school-choice ideas while eliminating the bad.

Yet most charter schools continue to be opposed by teachers' unions and Democrats in many states. This leaves the door open for more radical choice-based privatization schemes like school vouchers. Vouchers are poor policy, breaching the church/state barrier and producing little in the way of positive results. But for minority parents whose children are stuck in terribly run public schools, the promise of a voucher is better than nothing—which too often is what the standard Democratic education agenda provides.

Democrats have made great strides in recent years in seizing control of issues like health care and the environment, adopting far-reaching agendas around which broad, winning coalitions can be built. Even once-insurmountable areas like tax policy are starting to seem within reach. But while Republicans deliberately manipulated language to nefarious ends in those areas—the estate tax becomes the "death tax" and so on—Democrats' rhetorical disadvantage on education is largely of their own making. Broadly supported ideas like public school choice and accountability for student learning have become disassociated with the party because *Democrats made it so*.

The negative impact of this has been hidden in recent years by President Bush's overwhelming overall unpopularity. But he'll be gone soon, and Democrats may have full responsibility for governance. If they don't move past Bush-bashing to real education reform, Republicans will once again be in a position to score some easy political points by simply observing that many public schools could be a whole lot better than they are.

To avoid this fate, Democrats just have to listen to the members of their party who are actually responsible for crafting education policy and running public schools. Sen. Edward Kennedy and Rep. George Miller, chairmen of the Senate and House committees that govern education, are perfect examples: Both are reliable, experienced liberals with proven track records on a range of health, labor, and social-justice issues. After decades of studying education issues firsthand, both Kennedy and Miller have come down firmly on the side of reform. Miller recently explained, "For too long, school districts and states really covered up and ignored the fact that the bottom 30 percent of our students were simply being ignored ... nobody was accountable for how they were doing." Miller has also pushed to reform the way teachers are recruited, trained, deployed, and paid. And in an early 2008 *Washington Post* op-ed, Kennedy laments that NCLB has become "a political football." Recalling his brother's Senate testimony, he writes, "Simplistic campaign rhetoric hardly reflects what's actually happening on school reform." Kennedy and Miller have repeatedly slammed President Bush for failing to support more funding for NCLB, but neither have budged on the need for testing and accountability, despite intense intraparty pressure to do so.

There are also plenty of examples at the local level, particularly in big cities, which over the past decade have been hotbeds of school reform. Mayors like Democrats Richard M. Daley in Chicago and Thomas Menino in Boston, and Republican-turned-independent Michael Bloomberg in New York have staked their political credibility on fixing poor-performing schools by installing reform-minded school chancellors. Test scores in all three cities have risen substantially, outpacing other urban areas around the nation. Newer mayors like D.C.'s Adrian Fenty have noticed and followed suit. Fenty appointed Chancellor Michelle Rhee, who says she's fully supportive of NCLB. Test scores increased significantly after a year of Rhee's reforms, faster than even the administration's supporters had expected. Democrats who actually get results for disadvantaged children deserve a great deal of consideration when it comes to the merits of education reform.

Meanwhile, Attorney General Blumenthal in Connecticut has continued to doggedly push his lawsuit, losing a series of court decisions along the way. And Connecticut has continued to distinguish itself by maintaining the largest achievement gaps between white and black students in the nation.

There is, however, a positive example of successful reform just one state away, in Massachusetts. In the early 1990s, the state overhauled its school-funding system, investing heavily in

high-poverty school districts, which now receive more money on average than low-poverty districts receive. Massachusetts has strong teachers' unions and among the highest teacher salaries and lowest student-to-teacher ratios in the nation. The state has become a leader in pushing for extending the school day to provide students with more learning time. These are all elements of the standard Democratic education agenda, which in Massachusetts should be no surprise.

But at the same time it was giving schools new resources, Massachusetts asked for more performance in return. Long before NCLB, the state implemented a rigorous and well-developed set of academic standards and tests. It embraced "high stakes" policies, only granting high school diplomas to students who passed 10th-grade exams. While many states have exploited loopholes in NCLB to minimize the number of "failing" schools, Massachusetts has aggressively moved to identify and intervene in schools where test scores remain persistently low. A charter school advocacy group recently identified Massachusetts as a "high achiever" for its charter school-friendly laws.

And Massachusetts became, unequivocally, the highest-performing state in the nation. Its scores on the widely respected National Assessment of Educational Progress leapt ahead of other states and continued improving even after it became No. 1. Of course, Massachusetts enjoys wealth, low poverty, and high levels of parental education, all factors that contribute to educational performance. But those things were true *before* the early-1990s financial and accountability reforms, and the state's scores have greatly improved since then.

Education reform and progressive politics aren't incompatible. They should be inseparable. Disadvantaged students need more equitable school funding and smart, well-represented teachers *along with* constructive accountability and public school choice. Progressivism, after all, is founded on a belief that public institutions like schools are improvable and can be a force for good. It is grounded in an ethos of information and rationality, which is what accountability really is: gathering information about how much students are learning and taking action when they're not learning enough. When Democrats stray from these tenets in education, they end up divided, weak, and vulnerable, reduced to arguing that the nation's most egalitarian and vital public institutions aren't worth trying to improve. It's time to stop giving Republicans easy opportunities to tarnish Democrats as unwilling to make hard choices on behalf of their own children.

True, the policies are complicated and the politics are messy, but that's no excuse to shrink from the challenge. Back at the ESEA hearings in 1965, the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare responded to Robert Kennedy's concerns about the effect of local control on the quality of education by saying, "That is the price of democracy." Kennedy replied: "It might be the price of democracy, but we don't have to accept it. We can attempt to do better." **TAP**

Kevin Carey is the research and policy manager of Education Sector, an independent think tank in Washington, D.C.

Culture & Books

"The left first ignored the American right, then imitated it, and then became obsessed with it."

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MOVIES

THE INVISIBLE WOMAN

After a summer of blockbuster comic-book flicks and record ticket sales to women, why have we yet to see a superheroine movie?

BY ALYSSA ROSENBERG

WHEN I WAS A KID, VISITING my cousin meant I got to do two things: sleep on the top bunk and page through his epic comic-card collection. I may have learned about dating from Archie Comics' Betty and Veronica, but the superheroines of Marvel and DC Comics were much more exciting. I coveted Rogue's kineti-

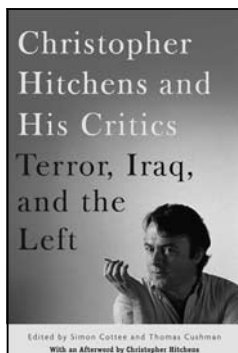
cally charged boyfriend, Jean Grey's red mane, and Wonder Woman's strength, even squeezed down to trading-card size. It was perfect training for a future superhero-movie consumer. I've followed my memories of those tiny illustrations to the theater to see the X-Men and Spider-Man franchises, I cheered Stan Lee's cameos in *The Incredible Hulk* and

Iron Man, and in May, I read everything about Marvel Comics' announcement that its film-production division would release six new movies by 2011.

But as the biggest superhero summer so far comes to a close, I can't help but notice that women have been firmly relegated to the sidelines as girlfriends and assistants. Five of the six upcoming Marvel movies feature male leads, and it's not clear which, if any, superwomen will end up in the only ensemble picture in the lineup, *The Avengers*. Why is it that a film industry will cast loveably schlubby Seth Rogen as the Green Hornet and will take a serious chance on an Ant-Man movie (both are due to hit theaters in 2010) but

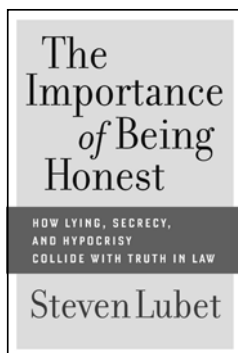
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can't get it together to make a Wonder Woman flick? Or any true superheroine movie at all?

The sad truth is, as special effects have gotten big, superwomen have gotten small.

It's not because directors and writers lack good material. There are hundreds of comic-book superheroines in the DC and Marvel Comics universes alone. Female characters play integral roles in almost every superhero team and major comic-book plot. Wonder Woman helps found the Justice League. The Scarlet Witch and the Black Widow are the first of many female members of the Avengers. Susan Storm Richards, the Invisible Woman, is one of the most important members of the Fantastic Four. At their best, a few superheroines transcend their paneled pages and become literary figures. But rather than drawing on extant rich stories about female superheroes, contemporary comic-based movies either downplay their powers and their personalities or rewrite them as trashy high camp.

Take the X-Men franchise, which is hardly short on compelling female characters. In the Dark Phoenix comic books, originally written between 1979 and 1980 by Chris Claremont and John Byrne, that form the basis for the 2006 film, *X-Men: The Last Stand*, super-psychic Jean Grey transforms into the fantastically powerful but amoral character Dark Phoenix. After destroying a star and a populated planet to fulfill an almost sexual hunger for power, Jean commits suicide to save the universe. As a character in the comic notes, "When faced with a choice between keeping her god-like power—knowing she would then wreak death and destruction across the stars—and dying herself, she chose the latter." It's a lot to make one woman both an agent of genocide and an exemplar of human goodness, but Claremont and Byrne pull it off.

Alas, in the film adaptation, director Brett Ratner basically confines Dark Phoenix (Famke Janssen) to vaporizing her boyfriend, Cyclops (James Marsden), shredding her mentor with glass, and removing Wolverine's (Hugh Jackman) belt with her mind. These are useful skills, to be sure, but they seem more wor-

thy of Uma Thurman's dumped G-Girl in 2006's cringe-worthy *My Super Ex-Girlfriend* (tagline: "He broke her heart. She broke his everything."). Rather than being supercharged, Janssen's Dark Phoenix looks like a wax doll. And rather than engineer her own justice, she has former suitor Wolverine do her in.

Other female X-Men suffer similar fates when adapted to the big screen. In the comic books, X-Men's Rogue struggles with her ability to absorb other people's powers and memories. On the page, Rogue finds love with fellow superhero Gambit, who can touch her without being affected by her powers, and she becomes more comfortable with her abilities once she joins the X-Men and accepts who she is. But in Ratner's film adaptation, Rogue (Anna Paquin) decides to take a vaccine to have her powers removed so she can touch—and keep—her boyfriend, Iceman. It's better, apparently, to be normal and keep the boy around.

With the notable exception of Wonder Woman, not many comic-book series focus exclusively on female heroes. But a market certainly exists for a solo superheroine movie. In 2006 Dan Buckley, Marvel Enterprises' publisher, said women's rising interest in comic books prompted the company to develop new storylines that would appeal to female readers. Marvel's director of sales, David Gabriel, said at the ComiCon convention that year that plotlines like the romance and wedding of Storm and the Black Panther, especially when repackaged in book form, could help reach black and female audiences by getting comics into mainstream bookstores rather than relying on readers to seek out specialty shops. And the audience isn't limited to women. In 1992, DC Comics told *The New York Times* that the then-50-year-old Wonder Woman was going strong with a 90 percent male readership. The Amazon princess almost certainly enjoys a larger market now than she did in 1967, when a test segment of a TV pilot was shot under a working title that played on her civilian name, "Who's Afraid of Diana Prince?"

It briefly looked as if Wonder Woman was about to get the big-screen treatment she deserved when, in 2005, Joss Whe-

don signed on to write and direct a film adaptation. (Whedon, the genre-busting writer, producer, and director, is best known for creating *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the toughest cheerleader ever to put on high heels and pick up a stake.) *Wonder Woman* not only held the potential to restore superheroines to their proper place but could have been one of the movies that reinvented the genre. But in early 2007, Whedon quit the project over creative differences with the studio. The film seems indefinitely shelved.

Whedon hasn't elaborated on the specifics of his differences with Warner Brothers, other than to say they were significant. But he did comment in a recent interview with media gossip blog Gawker that the critical and commercial failure of other comic-based movies with female leads has made it difficult for serious portrayals of superwomen to make it into theaters. "Progress is slow and often nonexistent,"

In the comics, Catwoman represents female vengeance, a cautionary tale for men who mistreat women. In the movies, she gets declawed.

Whedon said. "There's plenty of cool comics with female characters. ... But all it takes is one *Catwoman* to set the cause back a decade."

He was bemoaning failed superheroine movies that slathered on high camp and special effects while dumbing down their characters. Both 2004's *Catwoman* (starring Halle Berry) and 2005's *Elektra* (starring Jennifer Garner) were critical and commercial flops because they didn't embrace the fact that their characters are complicated anti-heroes; neither movie dares to make its heroine really bad or really good and neither movie ends up being very interesting.

In the comics, Catwoman represents female vengeance, a cautionary tale for men who mistreat women. In one origin story, Selina Kyle begins her life of crime by breaking into her abusive husband's safe to retrieve her jewelry and assumes the alter-ego of Catwoman. Frank Miller reintroduced Selina as a prostitute in 1986; in one spin-off, Catwoman kills

her former pimp to save her sister, whom he has kidnapped and abused. Michelle Pfeiffer captures some of this spirit of revenge as Catwoman in *Batman Returns* (1992) when, with an electrified smooch, she kills the abusive boss who pushed her out of a window. But when Berry has her turn as Catwoman in a leading role, Selina's name gets changed to Patience, and Catwoman gets declawed. Her nemesis is an evil makeup magnate (Sharon Stone), and Berry defeats her by scratching her marble-perfect face. If toning down Catwoman is what it takes to get her a movie of her own, it isn't worth the trade.

20th Century Fox didn't even try to turn *Elektra*, a spin-off of the 2003 *Daredevil* movie, into a blockbuster: The studio released the film in the late-January dead zone reserved for mediocre movies. In it, Garner dons a red bustier to reprise her role as an assassin who accidentally befriends two of her targets.

There's a lot of nonsense about competing secret societies and moral tests, all of which is obscured by some flashy special effects, including tattoos that turn into animals, which in turn turn into beams of light, and an attempted murder via same-sex kiss. Nothing's wrong with high camp. But it's easier to laugh at Nicolas Cage's deliberately ridiculous performance in the 2007 faux-Western superhero morality play, *Ghost Rider*, because we've already got big-screen versions of Batman, Spider-Man, Iron Man, and the Hulk standing by to remind us that being a superhero is really a serious and illuminating business.

Superwomen, on the other hand, are in danger of appearing merely risible. Robert Rodriguez is unlikely to correct that impression with his upcoming *Red Sonja* remake, slated for 2010 and adapted from the comics about a 16th-century barbarian babe famous mostly for popularizing the chain-mail bikini. Sonja is not even really a superhero, but she is

the only comic-book woman who's set to hit theaters in the foreseeable future.

After a summer during which women flexed their box-office muscle, giving *Sex and the City* the highest-grossing opening for an R-rated comedy in movie history, it's not inconceivable to think that a superheroine flick could draw on both the "girls' night out" crowd and the already broad fan base for comic-book movies. That would be a great development, and not just for the studios that would experience a revenue bump of the kind provided by the Spider-Man and X-Men franchises. Superheroine movies could instantly provide badly needed quality roles for talented female actresses of varying ages and ethnicities, helping to address a gender imbalance in summer movies that's caused critics like *The New York Times'* Manohla Dargis (herself a minority in a world of mostly male reviewers) some serious heartburn.

Superwomen could also appeal to the tween set and challenge the stars of the Disney juggernaut, like singer-actresses Miley Cyrus, by injecting some female muscle and a little intelligent, nonexploitative sex appeal into the marketplace. And they could give supermen a good shaking-up. From Batman's brooding darkness to the Hulk's search for peace to Iron Man Tony Stark's solitary tinkering, superheroes these days are a somewhat inward-looking lot. Putting Rogue back in her bright-green suit, restoring the shine of PVC to Catwoman's outfit (if Hulk got rebooted, why not Selina Kyle?), and bringing back Susan Storm's desire to connect with her fellow heroes would do a lot to liven up summer screens.

And why not start with the superwoman who was sent here to bring a feminine—and feminist—perspective to the fight against evil? It might take *Wonder Woman's* Lasso of Truth to make studio executives own up to the fact that 41 years after she first made it on the screen, they're still afraid of Diana Prince. **TAP**

Alyssa Rosenberg is a staff correspondent at Government Executive where she covers the federal work force. She writes regularly for National Journal and The New Republic.

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The Measure of America

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*Sarah Burd-Sharps,
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RIGHTWARD BOUND: MAKING AMERICA CONSERVATIVE IN THE 1970S
EDITED BY BRUCE J. SCHULMAN AND JULIAN E. ZELIZER, Harvard University
Press, 384 pages, \$49.95

BY E.J. DIONNE JR.

THE LEFT FIRST IGNORED THE
American right, then imitated it,
and then became obsessed with it.

That pattern is likely to reproduce
itself in reverse, even if conservatives
are currently stuck in the first stage:
They are so persuaded that ours is a
"center-right country," to use a phrase
Karl Rove is fond of, that they cannot
take the center-left seriously. Just as a
legion of liberals initially dismissed the
resurrection of Richard Nixon and the
rise of Ronald Reagan as aberrations, so
many conservatives are now dismissing
the parlous state of their creed and the
Obama phenomenon as an accident of
George W. Bush's presidency.

The parallels between 1980 and 2008
are extraordinary. Liberals once asked:
How could Jimmy Carter's presidency
be held against us, since Carter was no
liberal? Conservatives are asking why
George W. Bush, whom they now see as
a big-government big-spender, should be
held against conservatism. Our friends
on the right are running away from Bush,
a man they once embraced slavishly as
the architect of a new conservative era,
with embarrassing eagerness.

And if some progressives once thought
there was nothing wrong with their
movement that a purer doctrine wouldn't
cure, so now are many on the right pro-
claiming that their movement will be
saved only by true, full-throated and
unembarrassed conservatism.

But facts, as Reagan once said, are
stubborn things, and conservatives would
do well to consult some of the fine work
now being done by progressive historians
on the conservative era that is in its final
days. If liberals once dismissed the rising
right as a bunch of insecure crackpots
animated by "status anxiety" and other
psychological ills, the right's undeniable
successes have forced them to take a more
sober and, occasionally, a more respectful
view. Serious studies of the right are now
an academic-growth industry. One of the
great virtues of *Rightward Bound: Mak-
ing America Conservative in the 1970s*,
the helpful collection of essays edited by
Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer,
is that it gathers in one place many of the
best young left-of-center historians work-
ing on the rise of the right. Conservatives
will take issue with many of the book's
conclusions; they cannot say any longer,
as they once could, that the liberal acad-
emy doesn't take conservatism seriously.

In his excellent *The Age of Reagan*,
Sean Wilentz certainly takes his subject
seriously. Above all, Wilentz grasps the
relevance of Reagan's past as a hope-
ful New Dealer to his success as a con-
servative politician, when he harnessed
Rooseveltian optimism to a creed devoted
to undoing FDR's legacy. In the pro-
cess, Reagan transformed conservatism
itself, at least temporarily.

Reagan, Wilentz writes, "had the
optimistic temperament and rhetorical

skills to turn right-wing Republicanism into Reaganism—no longer a crabby rejection of modern life or a dour Calvin Coolidge-like promotion of big business (much as Reagan admired Coolidge), but an outgoing, energizing, even sensuous ideal of a bountiful, limitless American future open to everyone who was determined to succeed.” You might say that he promised change we could believe in to a country that wanted another rendezvous with destiny.

Reagan pulled the country to the right, creating a problem for devotees of centrism. During the 1980s, finding the center meant chasing a moving target.

Wilentz shrewdly notes that Reagan-style conservatism “had nothing to do with veneration of tradition or a fixed hierarchy.” Rather, “Reaganism represented a New Deal in American conservatism, aligning, as never before in the nation’s history, pro-business economics and regression on civil rights with democratic, even populist, forward-looking political appeals.”

Understanding Reagan in this way allows Wilentz to see that the Gipper should not be parodied as an ignorant troglodyte, as liberals are often tempted to do, nor turned into a model conservative ideologue, the Reagan preferred by his right-wing hagiographers. Like all successful politicians, Reagan was complicated, and Wilentz has the mix right when he describes Reaganism as “its own distinctive blend of dogma, pragmatism, and, above all, mythology.” The Reagan years, he says, “defy easy definition as ‘conservative,’ ‘hawkish’ or ‘pro-business,’ let alone ‘Republican.’”

Indeed, to the extent that Reagan is still seen as a success in foreign affairs, it may have to do not just with his military build-up and condemnation of the Soviet Union as an Evil Empire but also with his willingness to recognize the opening created by the rise of Mikhail Gorbachev. Wilentz reminds us that Reagan’s later role as a peacenik enraged many of his conservative supporters. Howard Phillips, one of the stalwarts of the right, denounced him as “a useful idiot for Kremlin propaganda,”

and *The Washington Times* likened Reagan to Neville Chamberlain.

When the *Prospect*’s Harold Meyerson wrote the words “I miss Ronald Reagan” a few years ago apropos our current president, he may have been joking, but his point was also dead serious. Compared with the current president, Reagan really was a moderate and a pragmatist. Yes, Reagan did usher in a period of reactionary economic policy with steep tax cuts for the wealthy and his decision to break

the air traffic controllers’ union, speeding the decline of labor’s power. But Reagan could adjust to circumstances. In the face of rising deficits, he was willing to undo some of his tax policy by signing the largest tax increase up to that point in history. Here again was a form of flexibility antithetical to the spirit of the current administration.

Throughout the 2008 primaries, conservatives spoke often about conjuring Reagan’s old spirit and finding “the next Reagan.” This was oddly out of sync with Reagan himself, who was always a person of his times, whether as a New Dealer or as a conservative. Reagan had no desire to be the next Taft, the next Coolidge, or even the next Goldwater (who, after all, lost). Moreover, to the extent that the Bush Interlude has created nostalgia for the age of Reagan, it is not because Bush was insufficiently conservative but because he lacked Reagan’s willingness to cast aside dogma if dogma didn’t deliver the goods. Reagan was perfectly willing to abandon flawed policies without looking back—most notably when he cut and ran from Lebanon after 241 Marines were killed by terrorists.

And Reagan, unlike Bush, had a real feel for Democrats and what made them tick. That was true even for liberal Democrats. To the extent that Bush could relate to Democrats at all, it was to Texas’ Tory Democrats, most of whom eventually became Republicans. Reagan loved the

country club, but he knew the union hall. Bush claimed to be the regular guy who could relate to workers, unionized and otherwise. But for all the brush he cut on his ranch, it was the world of the country club and the boardroom that shaped him, determined his closest political friendships, and defined his domestic policies. Faux populism carried Bush only so far.

Yet if Reagan’s stabs at populism felt more authentic, he was no populist. Indeed, except in comparison with Bush, he was no moderate. One of his genuine achievements was to pull the country well to the right, which meant shifting the political center far from where it had been in, say, 1964.

That shift created a real problem for devotees of centrism. During the 1980s, finding the center meant chasing a moving target. As the center moved right, so did the centrists. For moderates and progressives alike, it was a losing game. The conservatives, who struggled for a quarter-century to achieve this outcome, knew what losing felt like.

ATHWART HISTORY, YELLING “STOP”

“I am the founder of a conservative journal which took its place, very soon after its nativity, at the center of conservative political analysis in America,” writes William F. Buckley Jr. in *Flying High: Remembering Barry Goldwater*, an elegant little memoir published this year shortly after Buckley’s death. “Insights and formulations about which we felt strongly were being ignored by others on the political scene—at times suppressed, at times awkwardly misrepresented.”

It’s difficult now to remember how marginal conservative thought was in the 1950s, when Buckley founded *National Review*. It was a magazine, Buckley proudly declared, that “stands athwart history, yelling Stop.” The journal, he wrote in its opening editorial published on November 19, 1955, “is out of place because, in its maturity, literate America rejected conservatism in favor of radical social experimentation.”

Liberals saw the 1950s as sleepy, self-satisfied, and conformist. Buckley saw the 1950s as conformist, too. “There never was an age of conformity quite like

this one, or a camaraderie quite like the Liberals,” Buckley writes in that opening essay. And then he goes after one of the era’s most prominent liberal journalists, its premier liberal historian, and liberalism’s poet laureate: “Drop a little itching powder in Jimmy Wechsler’s bath and before he has scratched himself for the third time, Arthur Schlesinger will have denounced you in a dozen books and speeches, Archibald MacLeish will have written ten heroic cantos about our age of terror, *Harper’s* will have published them, and everyone in sight will have been nominated for a Freedom Award.”

He concludes: “Conservatives in this country—at least those who have not made their peace with the New Deal, and there is a serious question of whether there are others—are non-licensed non-conformists.”

Classic Buckley panache, but broadly true: The founding of *National Review* was the single most important event in the rise of a new conservatism. It wasn’t just a magazine. It was also coalition, a

think tank, and a twice-monthly seminar. It brought together the most important strands of right-wing thinking, libertarian, traditionalist, and anti-communist. It consciously excluded certain distasteful elements of the right, notably the anti-Semites, although its views on racial matters were, well, reactionary.

From the beginning, the new conservatism was an unstable creed. Buckley and his chief ideologist, Frank Meyer, struggled with some brilliance to create coherence out of the disparate strands. The result was “fusionism,” which brought together Burkean traditionalists who revered religion and old habits and didn’t necessarily care much for economic markets, and libertarians, who loved the market, prized freedom over tradition, and did not necessarily care much about God. But Buckley-style libertarians were a special kind, abandoning the non-interventionism (or isolationism) of the 1930s in favor of an aggressive anti-communism. Anti-communism was a primary requirement for baptism and con-

firmation in the Buckley congregation—an apt enough metaphor since a conservative Catholicism was an important influence on the *National Review* fellowship. You could occasionally smell the incense on the magazine’s pages.

The best one-line description of fusionism’s aspirations came from Donald Devine, a political scientist who served in the Reagan administration. Fusionism, he said, meant “utilizing libertarian means in a conservative society for traditionalist ends.” If American society was fundamentally conservative, liberty was sufficient to allow Americans to be their traditionalist selves. But what if American society really weren’t conservative? If conservatives were actually nonconformists, maybe the whole society was infected with liberalism. That is a problem for fusionism to this day.

Historically, fusionism has worked as long as the right had a clear and powerful enemy (communism, a dominant New Deal, or Great Society liberalism), or if it had a leader who could somehow man-

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age to keep all the camps happy. Reagan was the one leader who actually pulled this off. George W. Bush managed this feat for awhile, embodying within himself his party's two key coalition groups, the evangelical conservatives and the big-business/country-club Republicans, a version of the traditionalist-libertarian alliance. Fusionism also worked well in opposition: All could put aside their differences to fight back against the liberal enemy, the Pinks or the Reds.

But whenever things went badly, the whole rickety structure would fly apart. The theologians and theoreticians of the different strands of conservatism really did mistrust each other, and still do. The libertarians see the traditionalists as fussy busybodies. The traditionalists see the libertarians as decadent libertines. Absent Buckley's charm and magnetism, conservatism and the *National Review* might well have collapsed somewhere around 1959.

Running a government on conservative principles is hard-going, since some conservatives mistrust the very enterprise

of governing. Conservatives who use government spending to prime the machine (whether through the Bush prescription-drug plan or Tom DeLay's love of earmarks) are seen as turncoats, once the payoffs stop working. The disdain for big government starts looking phony when the foreign-policy hawks insist that largesse for defense contractors, security firms, and the military establishment is, somehow, not real spending. Only social welfare expenditures count as *real* spending.

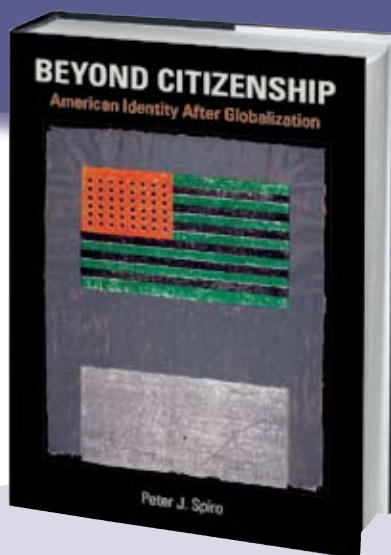
The end days of both the first and second Bush administrations are revealing. George H. W. Bush was never seen as an authentic conservative, coming as he did from the heart of the old Republican establishment. The first President Bush's father, Sen. Prescott Bush, described himself in the mid-1950s, at the time of *National Review*'s founding, as a devotee of "progressive moderation" or "moderate progressivism," not exactly the creed Buckley was pushing. Prescott Bush was also a strong supporter of Dwight Eisenhower, whom Buckley loathed. The right

remembered these things and associated them with the elder Bush. And so, when he behaved exactly as a responsible, old-fashioned Republican would and agreed to raise taxes to cut soaring deficits, the first President Bush was denounced by the conservatives as a traitor. The very sin for which Reagan received full absolution over and over—he raised taxes four times between 1982 and 1984—was unforgivable when Bush committed it once.

Except for his largely rhetorical commitment to "compassionate conservatism," George W. Bush bore no traces of his grandfather's approach to politics and was determined never, ever to make his father's mistake of getting crosswise with the conservative movement. Yet when his administration started sinking, conservatives did not talk about the war that destroyed his presidency or the tax cuts that ballooned the deficit. They talked about the prescription-drug plan, his No Child Left Behind education bill, and "spending"—in the abstract, of course, and not for the war. Being a Bush

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always means having to say you're sorry to conservatives.

Of course, when Barry Goldwater ran in 1964, conservatives were just coming into their own and did not yet exert that kind of ideological power. The most fascinating revelation of Buckley's account is the extent to which *National Review's* loyalists were largely frozen out of the Goldwater operation. Buckley uses *Flying High* to settle a few scores and to pay homage to his brother-in-law Brent Bozell, the ghostwriter of Goldwater's *The Conscience of a Conservative* (1960). As Buckley notes, that book "acquired near scriptural authority" among conservatives, although it's not clear that Goldwater ever read the manuscript that carried his name.

Goldwater's campaign was historically significant for two reasons. It marked the capture of the Republican apparatus by the conservative movement, thus setting off the slow purge of the many liberals who still called themselves Republican. And it started Ronald Reagan's political career.

Like Barack Obama (and also William Jennings Bryan), Reagan owed his breakthrough to a single speech. "A Time for Choosing" was presented to a nationwide television audience shortly before Goldwater went down to a disastrous—if, for the right, also glorious—defeat. In one of those fascinating contingencies of history, Buckley describes how the Reagan speech was almost never broadcast because of objections from some of Goldwater's lieutenants. No speech, no Reagan era.

Reagan's oration was red meat for what we now call "the base." ("Last February 19 at the University of Minnesota, Norman Thomas, six-time candidate for President on the Socialist Party ticket, said, 'If Barry Goldwater became President, he would stop the advance of socialism in the United States.' I think that's exactly what he will do.") The address did Goldwater absolutely no good on Election Day. But it allowed conservatives around the nation to identify whom they'd turn to after Goldwater's inevitable electoral demise. Liberalism was at high tide and

the Great Society was roaring forward, but conservatives had the hero to lead them when the time was right.

THE COLLECTOR OF RESENTMENTS

There was another political figure at least as important as Goldwater to the rise of the right and Reagan. Richard Nixon laid the foundations of what became the Reagan electoral coalition in 1968. He also contributed to the discrediting of government that allowed Reagan's core appeal—"government is not the solution to our problem, government is the problem"—to seize the popular imagination. The great paradox is that the fall of Nixon, which initially pushed the country toward the Democrats, actually accelerated the country's turn to the right. Alienation bred by the Vietnam War, rising crime, an exhaustion with the reformist zeal of the Johnson era, and a backlash on race enabled Nixon to win. The further alienation bred by Watergate and then the perceived failure of the centrist administrations of Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter gave Bill Buckley's non-licensed nonconformists their chance. For this reason, the politically savvy Wilentz is absolutely right to date the beginning of the age of Reagan to Nixon's fall in 1974.

An objective take on Nixon is almost as hard to find as a dispassionate analysis of the Red Sox by a Yankees fan, or vice versa. Rick Perlstein's *Nixonland* does not in any way claim to be objective. It is a huge romp of a book—an entertaining narrative that is also a collection of mini-essays on important, interesting, and weird moments that made the '60s the '60s.

If you want to understand why even many people on the left, let alone blue-collar conservatives and future neo-conservative intellectuals, became estranged from the incoherent pretensions of the counterculture, consider this proclamation on a poster at a 1967 "Human Be-In" at San Francisco's Golden Gate Park that Perlstein records: "A new concept of human relations being developed within the youthful underground must emerge, become conscious, and be shared so that a revolution of form can be filled with a Renaissance of compassion, awareness, and love in the

THIS BOOK WILL BE WARMLY EMBRACED by Democrats who view George W. Bush as the Preposterous Imposter. He has already descended to the lowest rung on the presidential ladder.

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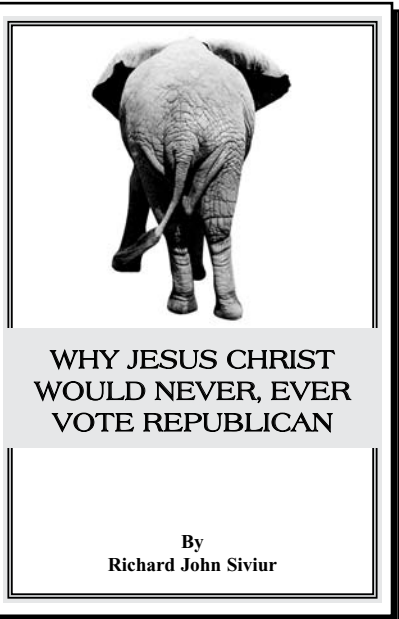
Republicans are the Party of Big Business (the POBB) as well as the Party of White Males (the POWM). In Congress they have no black members and few women.

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Revelation of the unity of all mankind.”

If you go in for this sort of thing, a better option is Jack Kerouac’s original version from *On The Road* in which he asserts that “the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn, like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes ‘Awww!’” There is a certain Kerouac style of spontaneous composition in Perlstein’s narrative that produces an occasional carelessness—to pick just one example, blue-collar Congressman Paul A. Fino was a Republican from the Bronx, not Queens—but also gives the book an infectious energy.

I’m probably a trifle softer on Nixon than Perlstein is, partly for a reason he analyzes so well. If there is a theme running through this book, it is Nixon as the outcast square facing off against the priv-

to turn him into a Cambridge-Hyde Park “Franklin.”

Nixon brilliantly played on the divisions in the Republican Party bred by the rise of the Goldwater movement and the decline of the liberal Republicans. Left for dead after his failed run for governor of California in 1962, Nixon became the go-between in a torn party. The moderates and liberals thought he was more one of them than the crazies who rallied



Nixon was engaged in a balancing act. That he fell off the wire was in some ways tragic, in many ways just, and in retrospect inevitable.

ileged beautiful people. Perlstein describes Nixon as “a serial collector of resentments” and takes us back to his decision to form a counter-fraternity at Whittier College called “The Orthogonians” to face off against “a circle of swells who called themselves the Franklins.” The Franklins “were well-rounded, graceful, moved smoothly, talked slickly.” The Orthogonians got their name from a word that meant “at right angles,” and Nixon said the term meant that to belong to the group meant being “upright” and a “straight-shooter.”

No politician was thus better prepared to take on the resentments in the 1960s against “limousine liberals” and the privileged rebellious young. Some might see Perlstein as pushing his metaphor a bit too hard, but he is definitely onto something important. The 2008 Republican campaign against Barack Obama’s supposed elitism might be seen as an effort

to Goldwater, and the Goldwaterites—remembering the Nixon of the Hiss case and his condemnations of Dean Acheson’s “College of Cowardly Communist Containment”—had far more faith in him than in the Romneys, the Scrantons, and the Rockefellers.

Nixon also knew which way the wind was blowing. He had, in many ways, been a liberal on civil rights. But he knew that many blue-collar voters in the North and whites in the South were angry about the new civil-rights laws and the liberals who promoted them. It was Nixon who pioneered the now clichéd Republican stratagem of painting all liberals as elitists (those Franklins) and conservatives as the vanguard of the (white) working class.

If Perlstein’s book is long, it’s because Nixon is a baffling and contradictory subject. In some ways, he was the last liberal Republican, signing all sorts of pro-

gressive domestic legislation put before him by a Democratic Congress, mostly because he cared far more about foreign policy than about anything at home. Yet his key strategic moves—the Southern strategy, the appeal to “peripheral urban ethnics” in the North, the attacks on “McGovernism,” the counterculture, and “acid, amnesty and abortion”—set the parameters for the strategy of the rising right. He surrounded himself with a gifted, politically diverse crew that allowed him to move toward the center when it suited him and to veer right when such tacking was helpful. But the resentments that Perlstein underscores ultimately got the better of Nixon, and Watergate was the result. Nixon, like the rising right, was engaged in an intricate balancing act. That he fell off the wire was in some ways tragic, in many ways just, and, in retrospect, inevitable.

HOPE CHANGES HANDS

Liberals and progressives are forever berating themselves for their contradictions, their inability to stand together against the right-wing threat, their perfectionism in policy, and their lack of militancy. Yet in fairness to the right, the center-left is hardly made up of a bunch of patsies, and the second Bush administration has created a hardened, angry, determined liberal opposition.

In so many ways, the rise of Barack Obama parallels the rise of Reagan. It’s not just the Big Speech. If the Reagan right built on the philosophical innovations of Buckley and the organizational innovations of the new right in the 1970s described in *Rightward Bound*, so Obama became the beneficiary of a new progressivism. He took the online creativity of Howard Dean to a new level, much as Reagan mainstreamed Goldwater’s mass movement.

If the right developed a broad set of ideas based on smaller government, tax cuts for the wealthy, and deregulation during its time in opposition, the liberal left slowly found consensus during its years in the wilderness around a new agenda of moderately more active government in the areas of health care, retirement security, business regulation,

and mobility. And if the right successfully finessed some of its divisions (the big philosophical divide between libertarians and traditionalists and the big policy divide between deficit hawks and tax cutters), so has the center-left eased the tensions between new and old Democrats and tried (with mixed success) to paper over differences on trade and the purposes of American foreign policy.

Like Reagan, Obama has the great advantage of running for president when the other side has presided over stunning failures. Bush's failures are more serious than Carter's were, but the basic pattern is the same. Not only a government but also a party, an ideology, and a way of doing business stand discredited to a large majority of Americans. The conservative project itself is exhausted. If Carter's failures and difficulties created Reaganism's opening, so Bush's blunders have opened up new possibilities.

Oddly, Obama's efforts also parallel those of the man who campaigned so hard against him this spring. Since 1980, Bill Clinton was the one and only Democrat to reach the White House (even if Al Gore would have gotten there absent ballot snafus in Florida and the intervention of conservative Supreme Court justices). Wilentz is friendly to Clinton but honest about his complexity. "Clinton was not one thing or another, but many things at the same time, and somehow they all hung together. ... He came across as a bundle of contradictions, eternally tangled up in nuance." Yet Wilentz argues that this allowed Clinton to create "an evolving, sometimes improvised, pragmatic politics, informed by liberal values and worked out on the job."

For Obama, the task is to absorb the lessons Clinton taught and then to transcend them. Clinton, after all, was operating in an environment heavily influenced by conservative ideas and assumptions—smack in the middle of Wilentz's age of Reagan. The politics of the Third Way was its own balancing act. Clinton tried to understand the reasons for liberal failure, accommodate the right when necessary, and push forward when possible. Absent the scandal that dominates the memory of Clinton's critics, he

might have made even more progress.

No politician has a clean slate, but Obama has advantages that Clinton lacked: a center-left that is bolder, a Democratic Party united by George W. Bush, a deep consensus for change. He also faces problems in foreign affairs and the economy that are more serious than Clinton faced, and those problems also create opportunities for Obama to break through the resistance to change.

Above all, Obama does not have to worry as Clinton did about an energetic, self-confident, and assertive conservative movement. Bill Buckley's death coincided with the decline of an alliance he did so much to build. Indeed, at the

time of his death, Buckley harbored great unhappiness about the war in Iraq. If Bush's stewardship of the country was flawed, so, too, was his proprietorship of the House that Buckley and Reagan Built. That is why progressives have their opening, and it is why hope, a virtue that Reagan briefly incarnated, is now Obama's greatest asset. **TAP**

*E.J. Dionne Jr. is the author, most recently, of *Souled Out: Reclaiming Faith and Politics after the Religious Right*. He is a Washington Post columnist, a senior fellow at The Brookings Institution, and a professor at Georgetown University.*

BOOKS

THE CORRUPTER OF YOUTH

RICHARD RORTY: THE MAKING OF AN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER

BY NEIL GROSS, University of Chicago Press, 367 pages, \$32.50

BY MARK GREIF

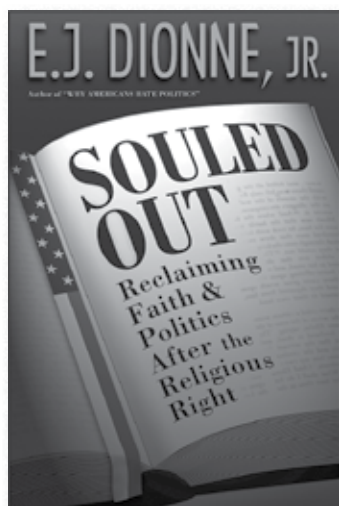
BY THE LAST YEARS OF THE 20TH century, Richard Rorty was probably the best-known university-based philosopher in the United States. In recent years he has been surpassed in notoriety by the utilitarian ethicist Peter Singer, known for his advocacy of animal rights and the acceptability of euthanizing severely disabled newborns. Rorty, in his time, was accused of murdering truth. He argued the position that there was no standpoint outside of human descriptions of the world from which to decide that any one view was false and another true. There were only descriptions in more or less convincing language, with more or less convincing uses, by which people might persuade one another how to live in the world.

Rorty called his position pragmatism, following in the grand tradition of John Dewey and William James. Critics called it relativism, or a claim that no view or behavior is better or worse than another, except as it appears to its possessor or practitioner. The unshakeable consistency with which Rorty invited people to downgrade their pretensions about themselves—including philosophers' giv-

ing up a special, privileged access to the right, good, and true—infuriated readers in many different fields, not least his own, for 30 years.

At lectures on the many topics Rorty took up once he had become a significant public figure—human rights, labor unions, a revival of the political left—hostile audience members would often revisit the claims he had laid out in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* in 1979, as if they might get him to recant his basic stance. I witnessed this spectacle a few times, as could anyone who attended a university in the 1980s and 1990s, when Rorty had become a ubiquitous commentator, ceaselessly touring campuses worldwide. Rather than exhort or inspire by force of personality, Rorty in the flesh always acted slightly embarrassed to be the center of attention. His perpetual chagrin seemed the effect of a lightning-quick and catholic mind combined with a temperament so deeply hostile to pretension and so insistent upon the folly of intellectual grandiosity that he must constantly chasten himself.

The myth of Rorty grew up around the belief that he was a sudden apos-



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tate. A tenured professor of philosophy at Princeton, author of a series of significant papers in the philosophy of mind, he had made a turn to history and wider perspectives that impelled his profession to reject him. The notion that the turn had come out of nowhere—that an analytic philosopher had woken up one morning and denounced his colleagues as absurd, meanwhile rejecting a tradition of epistemology that went back to Descartes or, in later writings, to Plato—added to his authority for many enemies of the analytic style.

This misunderstanding of Rorty's path was corrected unexpectedly when, in later years (he died in 2007, active until the end), he began speaking publicly about his roots, in the lectures published as *Achieving Our Country* (1998) and in a notable autobiographical essay, "Trosky and the Wild Orchids," dating to 1993 but republished as the first selection in his more popularly oriented volume *Philosophy and Social Hope* in 2000. Rorty's formal education had been in a style of intellectual history at the University of Chicago that instilled a command of the past and its pluralism of traditions, as well as a blinkered confidence in "eternal truths" that would trouble Rorty for decades. His father was James Rorty, the socialist and anti-Communist poet, journalist, and polemicist who had belonged to the circles of the New York Intellectuals. His mother, Winifred Rauschenbusch, also an intellectual, was the daughter of the Social Gospel minister Walter Rauschenbusch. Not to turn to large matters of general interest, not to seek a more democratic, secular, and usable tradition of truth-seeking and debate, working through an extensive repertoire of authors from Plato to Dewey to Proust, would have been the real betrayal of his past.

The sociologist Neil Gross' new book on Rorty clarifies the exact details of the thinker's educational and professional activities up to the point, in 1982, when he ascended that larger stage and gained an audience beyond the philosophy department wall. Gross fills in information about Rorty's choices when applying to graduate programs, the contents of his master's and Ph.D. dissertations, the professors

and departments regnant in academic philosophy during his early career, Rorty's tenure offers, and things like his correspondence with colleagues and deans. The book adds two sensitive chapters on his mother and father, embracing such topics as James Rorty's suffering while serving in World War I and both parents' personalities and states of mind. Richard is simply given a different kind of attention. His military service, the mood of his childhood, his personal style as an adult, his friendships and interests, are all left out despite Gross' access to Rorty's personal papers and correspondence.

The publishers may have done Gross a terrible disservice by marketing his book as a biography. It is explicitly a case study, treating only professional details for purposes of sociology. Specifically, this is the sociology of the dynamics of American university careers in the second half of the 20th century. Its investment in empirical research (Rorty makes a sample of one) is oriented to theory creation and improvement. The monograph's early and late portions include literature reviews and excellent summaries of competing theoretical stances intended for the use of colleagues in the field. A truly superb section of the last chapter argues there was a "shift in the nature of intellectual authority in American academic life" from the post-war years to the 1970s and 1980s, "caused largely by structural transformations" in universities' finances and labor markets, a shift which parallels Rorty's turn from expert practice in his discipline to a critique of the conceit of rigorous expert knowledge (this would help to explain the magnitude of the reception of his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*).

But this is still not quite biography, and it's bound to be disappointing to those who expect one. True, readers drawn by the announcement of a first biography of Richard Rorty are unlikely to be looking just for personal interest: the facts of Rorty's divorce from the philosopher Amélie Rorty (briefly discussed) or a portrait of the thinker in his free time (not discussed). If they share any of the catholicity of attention of Rorty himself, they may be acquainted with the sociology of knowledge descended from Karl

Mannheim, or the history of ideas inherited from Arthur Lovejoy and revised by Quentin Skinner, or the theorization of intellectuals as a distinct class that has preoccupied commentators both academic and popular for a century.

But then Gross' book will disappoint a second time. Gross proposes himself as theorist and practitioner of a "New Sociology of Ideas," which has, as its other active figure, his dissertation adviser. His case study does not cover intellectuals in the ordinary language sense; in this work, Gross is forced to explain, "I use the terms 'intellectual' and 'thinker' as shorthand for 'faculty members in modern American academic settings.'" "Tenure" is almost a holy word in the book, as the grail for which "intellectuals" quest. With such a straitened notion of intellectual practice, Rorty is of interest primarily because his career path started outside the mainstream of his discipline, took him near its center, and then moved him to its periphery again at a higher level of success.

The theoretical innovation that emboldens Gross to declare a new school in sociology is his addition of an idea of "self-concept"—basically, how professors conceive of themselves as thinkers—as a determinant of their career behavior. Their un- or pre-intellectual career behavior in turn can influence their choice of subject matter and thought (for example, if they choose topics that help them gain attention and praise). This is supposed to compare favorably with the theories of Pierre Bourdieu and Randall Collins, two previous sociologists whom Gross aims to correct. Bourdieu can indeed be accused of slighting intellectuals' views of themselves and their "identity." A Rorty-like figure, he sought counterintuitive and uncommon forms of explanation for intellectuals' otherwise mystified achievements, looking to unacknowledged struggle, tangible and symbolic capital, and habitus (whole perceptual apparatuses conditioned by group socialization). But Bourdieu was deliberately neglecting the commonplace; it's only a trivially "superior" theory that stakes its claim by restoring the commonplace and universally acknowledged. In Gross' section on Thomas Kuhn's influence on Rorty, he reprises Kuhn's famous distinc-

tion between "normal" science—which takes the existing paradigm of explanation and seeks to make tiny adjustments to come to grips with anomalies—and "revolutionary" science, which introduces a new paradigm. Gross' contribution is a perfectly reasonable one when acknowledged as a piece of normal science.

Indeed, Gross' novelty of "self-concept" brings him more in line with normal practice in the discipline of intellectual history, a subfield in Gross' neighboring department that has increasingly fallen into desuetude. The classics of 20th-century intellectual biography as practiced by the last generation of intellectual historians—like Robert Westbrook's life of John Dewey, or Richard Wightman

in a discussion of his thoughts on the left student movement:

I honestly think that we—the parasitic priestly class which confers sacraments like BAs and PhDs—are the best agency for social change on the scene. ... This ... requires the continuation of the same claptrap about contemplation we've always handed out, because without this *mystique* the society won't let us get away with corrupting the youth anymore.

From the perspective of the objectivity of knowledge and the neutrality of teaching, this is damning: Rorty is a leftist who hides his colors in order to push his ideology. From Rorty's perspective, it is

Richard Rorty defined the "ironist" as "the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her most central beliefs and desires."

Fox's life of Reinhold Niebuhr—took into account their subjects' self-conceptions as they connected to the substance of ideas, the details of career moves, and something else, too: the dimension of personality and character. In intellectual biography, this can't be left aside as mere gossip or psychology.

With Rorty, for example, it seems impossible to contemplate his career decisions or his later ideas without acknowledging the odd intellectual temperament by which he became an ironist, and the degree to which he would be conscious of his own desires as products of institutions and circumstance. Treating this position abstractly, in the 1989 masterpiece *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, he defined the "ironist" as "the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her most central beliefs and desires—someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance." But one can feel the lucid yet tortuous personal side of his ironist's approach to life quite clearly in a tantalizing passage that Gross introduces from Rorty's correspondence from 1971,

the consequence of knowing that your liberal beliefs are conditioned by outside forces (your parents, your educational circumstances, and how you gain access to social and economic power, even as a professor) yet still holding passionately to these beliefs and wanting to try to convince others.

In 1971, he says troublingly that to be allowed to speak, you must play along with what others believe ("claptrap about contemplation," that is, a pretense of the value-neutral teaching countenanced by those outside the university). By 1978, Rorty was trying to tell what he considered the pragmatic truth about that "claptrap"—that he should teach things he believed in without claiming superior access to truth by contemplation, and that this was an appropriate task not just for political science or journalism but for the hallowed halls of philosophy. How he lived with his double perspective, day to day—how he could believe, and yet accept the contingency of his belief, and bear up under objections to his position as illogical, insulting, or corrupting—is the matter that biography still has to illuminate. **TAP**

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The Real Economic Choice

BY ROBERT B. REICH

UNDERNEATH THE RHETORIC AND 10-POINT ECONOMIC plans advanced by John McCain and Barack Obama lie two fundamentally different philosophies. It's not, as John McCain puts it, a choice between a tax-raiser and a tax-cutter. Nor is it simply a matter of whose plan is more

fiscally responsible (although McCain's blows the roof off of the budget deficit). What's really at stake is a choice between two basic ideas of how economies work and how prosperity is created. McCain's theory can best be described as top-down economics. Obama's is bottom-up.

Much of the last 30 years has been a long experiment with top-down economics. It originated with Ronald Reagan's supply-side tax cuts and met its full flowering in George W. Bush's reflexive insistence that tax cuts were the answer to any question. McCain's latest version holds that:

■ Tax breaks will give wealthy people incentive to work harder and invest more. Their harder work and added investments will generate more jobs and faster economic growth, to the benefit of average working people.

■ Tax breaks for corporations, along with reduced payroll costs and fewer regulations, will enable them to compete more successfully in global commerce. This, too, will result in more jobs for Americans and faster economic growth in the United States.

■ The best way to reduce the energy costs of average Americans is to give oil companies access to more land on which to drill and to lower their taxes and capital costs. If this happens, they'll supply more oil, reducing oil prices.

■ The best way to deal with the crisis in credit markets is to insure large investment banks against losses from sub-prime mortgages, in order to main-

tain liquidity, but not to protect individuals in danger of losing their homes.

All of these propositions are questionable in a global economy. Rich individuals do not necessarily invest in the United States; they invest wherever around the world they can get the highest returns. American-based corporations are doing business all over the world; their supply chains extend to wherever they can find low labor costs combined with high output. They sell wherever they can find willing buyers.

Oil companies, too, operate globally and set prices at the point where global supply meets global demand. Additional drilling here creates environmental risks for us but generates the same marginal benefits for consumers in China, India, and Europe as it does for us. Credit markets are global as well, so the beneficiaries of bailouts of large investment banks are also worldwide while the potential costs and the moral hazard fall on American taxpayers.

This isn't to argue that top-down economics is completely nonsensical. America is, after all, the world's largest economy. So whatever helps the top of it will to some extent trickle down to everyone else here.

But in a global economy, bottom-up economics just makes more sense. Bill Clinton briefly tried aspects of it, but at the insistence of Alan Greenspan, largely

gave it up. Barack Obama's economic approach embodies it completely. His new version holds that:

■ The growth of the American economy depends on the productivity of our workers. They are rooted here, while global capital and large American-based global corporations are not.

■ The productivity of American workers depends mainly on their education, their health, and the infrastructure that connects them together. These public investments are therefore critical to our future prosperity.

■ Global capital will come to the United States to create good jobs not because our taxes or wages or regulatory costs are low—there will always be many places around the world where taxes, wages, and regulatory costs are lower—but because the productivity of our workers is high.

■ The answer to our energy costs is found in the creativity and inventiveness of Americans in generating non-oil and non-carbon fuels and new means of energy conservation, rather than in global oil companies accessing more oil. That calls on us to subsidize basic research and development in energy alternatives.

■ To avoid a recession or worse, our priority should be improving the financial security of average Americans who are now sinking into a quagmire of debt and foreclosure. Otherwise, there won't be adequate demand to absorb all the goods and services the economy produces. The financial institutions that did the lending and knew the risks involved should bear the responsibility for the crisis, not the borrowers.

If the last 30 years offer any lesson, it's that top-down economics is a cruel hoax. As a result of top-down, a majority of Americans now find themselves with lower real wages and less health and pension protection than they did three decades ago, inequality is wider than it has been in 80 years, and the American economy is going down the tubes.

Isn't it time we tried bottom-up? **TAP**

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